DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 341 764 CE 052 856

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TITLE Training and Development. An Evaluation of Docklands SKILLNET Quick Start Initiatives. FEU/REPLAN.
INSTITUTION National Foundation for Educational Research in England and Wales, London.
SPONS AGENCY Further Education Unit, London (England).
REPORT NO ISBN-1-85338-123-3
PUB DATE 89
NOTE 127p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC06 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adult Education; Developed Nations; *Economic Development; Foreign Countries; Job Development; Job Skills; *Job Training; Program Development; *Program Effectiveness; Program Evaluation; *Unemployment; *Urban Renewal
IDENTIFIERS *England (London)

ABSTRACT

This report provides results of an evaluation of SKILLNET, an education and training innovation to commission training in the newly redeveloped area of London's dockland. Chapter 1, an introduction, defines SKILLNET's primary function--to address the current mismatch between kinds of jobs available in the area and the levels and kinds of skills possessed by the local population. Chapter 2 sketches SKILLNET's socioeconomic and historical context, outlines its inception and early organizational development, and describes how Quick Start Initiatives (QSIs) were set up. Chapter 3 explores the kinds of occupational and educational needs that SKILLNET aimed to address. Chapter 4 looks at the operation of SKILLNET QSI courses in different participating institutions within the network. Chapter 5 examines the characteristics of SKILLNET trainees from the three phases of the QSI program. Chapter 6 discusses the outcomes of training through SKILLNET QSI courses according to the qualifications trainees could gain and the use to which they could put them. Chapter 7 addresses the issue of outcomes in terms of observable employment patterns among trainees. The final chapter, chapter 8, draws out the main implications from the research findings and indicates areas which might form the basis for discussion and action in the future. A 29-item reference list is followed by appendices containing project information, questionnaires, course and skills lists, and other forms. (YLB)

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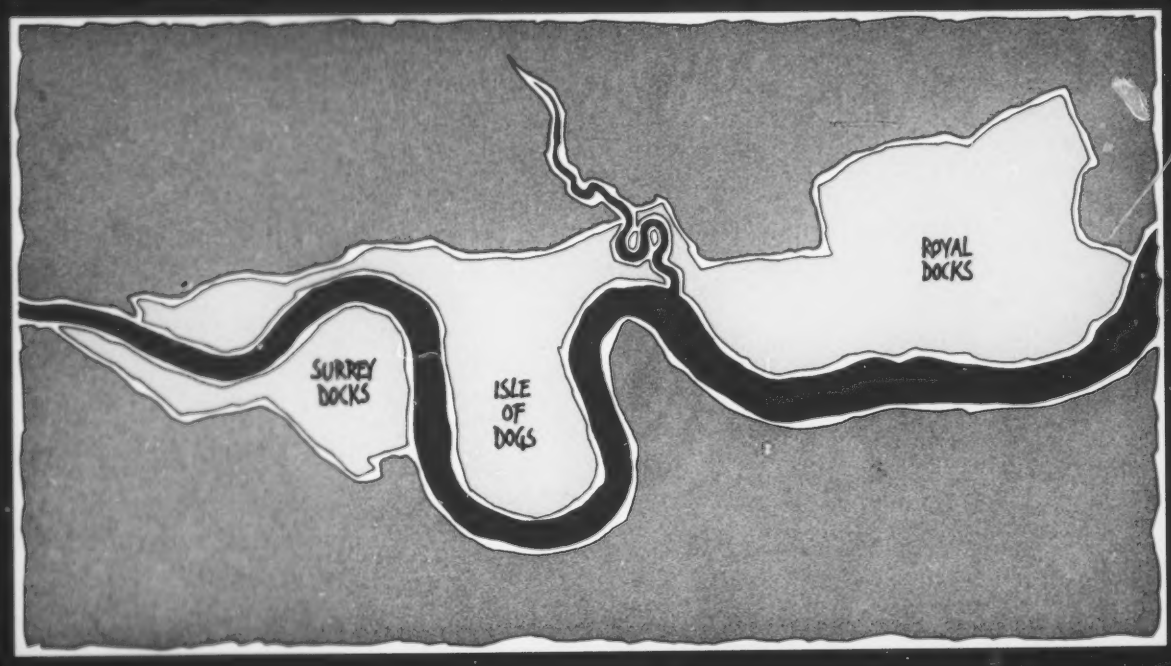

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TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

An evaluation of Docklands SKILLNET Quick Start Initiatives

Lesley Saunders

Commissioned by the Further Education Unit
FROM
National Foundation for Educational Research in England and Wales

ISBN 1 85338 123 3

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MINISTERIAL FOREWORD

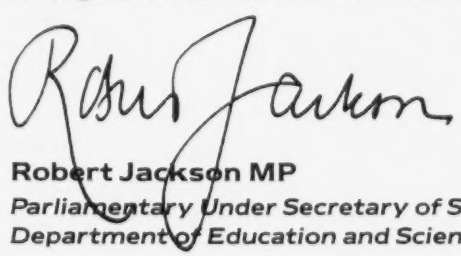
I am please to introduce this study of one kind of response to education and training needs in an inner city area.

The study, of the development of education and training in the London Docklands development area, was commissioned by the Further Education Unit, as part of its programme of REPLAN curriculum development projects, and was undertaken by the National Foundation for Educational Research.

The Government has responded vigorously to inner city problems and Development Corporations are key bodies in this response. Development is of limited value, however, if jobs created cannot be filled. Although levels of unemployment may be high, few inner city areas contain a sufficient pool of people with developed skills relevant to the new kinds of jobs that are likely to be created.

There are different solutions to this problem: for example, to import labour from outlying areas or, having identified the skills needed, to offer training to local people. The Government believes that the best way to regenerate inner city areas fully is to apply the latter approach as widely as possible.

The pioneering work of SKILLNET, which is the subject of this evaluation, will be of interest to all inner city providers of education and training. Observation of the issues which arose as the work of SKILLNET developed, and how these were addressed, should prove valuable to other initiators. I commend the report as evidence of the talents and energies which exist in our inner cities.



Robert Jackson MP
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State
Department of Education and Science

Acknowledgements

Whilst many people have contributed in their various and invaluable ways to the emergence of this report, my gratitude is due in particular to my colleagues at the NFER, Sheila Stoney and David Sims, for their continuing support and assistance, both professionally and personally, throughout the lifetime of the evaluation. David was additionally instrumental in producing the summary version of the report (available as a separate publication).

I am grateful to the FEU for its sponsorship of the project and should especially like to record my appreciation for the guidance generously given by Martin Johnson, the Development Officer responsible for seeing the evaluation through from beginning to end.

Members of the Steering Committee have offered important insights, essential information and warm-hearted advice without which this report could not have appeared in its present form. Colleagues not officially connected with the project nevertheless gave me the benefit of their professional experience and incisive understanding of some underlying issues: in particular I thank Malcolm Rigg and Bob Stradling.

I should also like to take this opportunity of thanking all the people who participated in the postal survey and the interviews we conducted, particularly those who travelled some distance with their small children to do so.

I should finally like to thank the temporary research assistant Dee Hamilton, who worked with an enthusiasm and eye for detail far beyond the call of duty.

Lesley Saunders

Abbreviations and Acronyms

AEI	*Adult Education Institute*
BTEC	*Business and Technician Education Council*
CAD/CAM	*Computer-aided design/manufacturing*
C&G	*City and Guilds of London Institute*
CITB	*Construction Industry Training Board*
CSE	*Certificate of Secondary Education*
CV	*Curriculum vitae (biographical sketch)*
DE	*Department of Employment*
DES	*Department of Education and Science*
DoE	*Department of the Environment*
DOC	*Docklands Open College*
ESF	*European Social Fund*
FEU	*Further Education Unit*
FHE	*Further and higher education*
GLC	*Greater London Council (now defunct)*
ILEA	*Inner London Education Authority*
LEA	*Local Education Authority*
LBN	*London Borough of Newham*
LCCI	*London Chamber of Commerce and Industry*
LDDC	*London Docklands Development Corporation*
MSC	*Manpower Services Commission (now the Training Agency)*
NFER	*National Foundation for Educational Research in England and Wales*
QSIs	*Quick Start Initiatives (SKILLNET's programme of short courses)*
RSA	*Royal Society of Arts*
UDA	*Urban Development Area*
VET	*Vocational education and training*

SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS

1. DOCKLANDS SKILLNET

1.1. SKILLNET is an education and training innovation whose role is to commission training provision within the newly redeveloped area of London's dockland.

1.2. SKILLNET evolved through a partnership consisting of the London Docklands Development Corporation (LDDC) (the body with responsibility for supporting economic and social regeneration in the area), the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) and the London Borough of Newham (LBN).

1.3. SKILLNET's primary aim, as set out in the Docklands SKILLNET Agreement, was to meet the education and training needs of local residents in order to achieve a closer match between their skills and the employment opportunities expected to arise as new firms moved into the area.

1.4. SKILLNET commissioned the first round of a programme of short courses, known as Quick Start Initiatives (QSIs), in 1986. These courses, offered by local education and training institutions in both public and independent sectors, covered subject areas relevant to anticipated employment opportunities. Based on support from the European Social Fund (ESF), they were intended for people under 25 who were currently unemployed.

2. THE BACKGROUND

2.1. The rationale for the original SKILLNET proposals was a high local rate of unemployment combined with a projected shortage of skilled labour for incoming firms. Remedying the perceived lack of skills among the local work-force was thus an economic priority for the LDDC.

2.2. Two principal factors contributed to the emergence of 'skills mismatch': the decline and radical redevelopment of the dockland area, which accelerated the shift away from manufacturing and towards service industries, and a long-standing local education/training 'deficit' characterised by a comparatively low level of qualifications and low take-up of further education opportunities among school-leavers.

2.3. ESF funding obtained for SKILLNET QSI courses had conditions attached to it which influenced both curricula and targeting. It also imposed a time-scale which did not allow adequate time for course development, proposal and approval procedures.

2.4. Moreover, there were difficulties associated with an idea of skills mismatch remediable by individual training:

- It is often hard to identify the skills purported to be lacking, partly owing to uncertainties on the demand side, especially in a rapidly changing labour market, but also owing to the fact that while people may lack qualifications, they do not necessarily lack skills.
- There is evidence that training is most likely to go to those people who already have qualifications.
- The local education/training 'deficit' is probably partly due to material disincentives obstructing the uptake of further education for working-class people.
- It is unclear to what extent unemployment is amenable to individual rather than structural solutions.

3. THE PARTNERSHIP

3.1. The partnership between the three sponsors (LDDC, ILEA and LBN) survived initial disagreements over priorities and direction which had in part arisen from the politically charged context in which SKILLNET had been set up. This was identified as one of the strengths of the project.

3.2. SKILLNET had, however, inherited an ambiguity of function: in its networking role SKILLNET provided, with varying degrees of success, an impetus for institutions to pursue curricular innovations, a chance to collaborate in a new kind of partnership in urban regeneration, and a funding mechanism.

3.3. SKILLNET was also implicitly allotted the role of delivering trainees into employment, at least in as far as its public credibility was concerned. Owing to the variety of practices in providing institutions, SKILLNET had insufficient control over curricula to fulfil such a role. Individual training needs in many cases required longer-term provision than QSI courses offered. Additionally, immediate employment prospects in the dockland area were uncertain, because many of the expected jobs were still notional. SKILLNET was thus vulnerable to adverse judgement on the basis of a function it could not realistically have fulfilled.

3.4. Differences of opinion therefore arose about the direction SKILLNET should take: whether the networking and collaborative goals of SKILLNET should be stressed (which have perhaps been the most innovative feature of the programme, but which were slow to mature); or whether the 'delivery' aspect should be given priority.

4. TRAINING PROVISION

4.1. Through its providing institutions, SKILLNET was part of the post-16 education field and also part of the training agency field. Since it also had a remit to liaise with employer networks, SKILLNET was theoretically in a good position to speed up the provision of training to match labour market requirements. But in practice the provision varied in relevance and responsiveness to the needs of both trainees and employers.

4.2. Institutions varied in their approach to trainee induction and support, open learning, basic skills support and careers guidance and job-search activities. Course tutors sometimes did not have experience of working with young unemployed adults with low qualifications. There was an ambiguity about whose responsibility – SKILLNET's or the institutions' – it was to support and follow up the trainees.

4.3. SKILLNET was set up to address abstractions of predicted labour shortages and high local unemployment rates rather than actual employers' or trainees' needs. Consequently, courses had often been devised according to extrinsic factors, such as ESF criteria and the differing contours of participating institutions' philosophies, staffing and curricular capacity.

5. THE TRAINEES

5.1. The clientele was in some ways 'invisible' and therefore needed to be recruited, and supported, by different means from those used to attract people into further education through the more usual routes.

5.2. Taking trainees' circumstances seriously was a hallmark of SKILLNET provision at its best, through such measures as the counselling service provided by SKILLNET, the daily allowance, flexible starting times and provision of child care on some courses.

5.3 However, when such provision was absent or broke down, it resulted in disappointment for trainees. Some trainees found that the courses had been badly organised or were inappropriate for their needs, especially in the light of publicity which had led them to have high expectations.

5.4. The lack of certification on SKILLNET courses was a source of dissatisfaction. Although many courses carried a recognised form of accreditation, trainees were often unable to gain such qualifications in the time allowed. There were, however, some trainees for whom the *process* of doing a SKILLNET course was valuable in itself and some for whom the *product* or outcome was more important.

6. KEY FINDINGS FROM THE TRAINEE SURVEY

6.1. SKILLNET courses attracted **more men than women** overall (though this had begun to change). Women tended to take word-processing and office skills courses, men electronics and engineering courses.

6.2. SKILLNET courses reached a cross-section of local population as far as **ethnic minority** representation was concerned.

6.3. **Employment-related reasons** for undertaking courses were given by over one-third of respondents.

6.4. Over half the respondents thought their course bestowed **some benefit,** though under one-third thought it had helped them to get a job.

6.5. Half the respondents **dropped out** of their courses; one-quarter dropped out through dissatisfaction with the course.

6.6. Very few people gained **qualifications** on their SKILLNET course.

6.7. **Previous qualifications** were a better guide to post-SKILLNET destinations than gender, ethnicity or qualifications gained on SKILLNET.

6.8. Nearly 40 per cent of respondents were **employed *post* SKILLNET**. But this proportion was not much higher than for people not on SKILLNET courses.

7. THE EMPLOYERS

7.1. Only a small number of SKILLNET trainees had been recruited for jobs through the SKILLNET placement service, owing to the lack of staffing resources allocated to the facility and to the difficulties many SKILLNET trainees faced in meeting employers' requirements.

7.2 Just as improvements need to be made regarding the qualifications, motivation and self-confidence of individuals, so is there a need to address some of the implications of employers' practices, in order to reduce the consequent wastage to themselves and to the communty.

7.3 It is arguably a part of SKILLNET's function to make the forms of accreditation which are awarded on SKILLNET courses acceptable to employers.

7.4 Differences of time-scale emerged, in that employers required a trained work-force as soon as possible, while trainees' needs were for longer-term development of skills and confidence.

POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

- SKILLNET could explore, with providing institutions and employers, what could or should constitute **common characteristics of SKILLNET courses**.
- A clearer definition could be agreed between SKILLNET and providers of the scale and detail of the **trainee support** needed.
- SKILLNET could systematically **monitor courses according to trainee outcomes** in order to feed back information to course planners. Local job opportunities and recruitment practices could also be monitored for the same purpose.
- **Staged progression** from basic or foundation level work through to higher vocational levels could be given more attention; this might include a wider adoption of **formative assessment**.
- Information could be gathered from course tutors about the way **open learning** techniques and materials are and could be used, together with some assessment of their cost-effectiveness.
- Some further **in-depth study** of small samples of trainees on different courses in different institutions would provide useful evidence on trainees' needs for SKILLNET's policy-making, planning and resourcing activities.
- Non-ESF-funded courses could be offered to unemployed people **of any age**, given appropriate course design.
- Regular meetings could be instituted by SKILLNET to provide a **tutors' network** of discussion, dissemination and support.
- Consideration could be given by SKILLNET to a policy of providing resources for **crèches** in providing institutions.

1

INTRODUCTION

THE RESEARCH PROJECT

Docklands SKILLNET is an education and training innovation whose role is to commission training provision in the newly redeveloped area of London's dockland. It has been developed through a partnership consisting of the London Docklands Development Corporation (LDDC) (the body with responsibility for supporting economic and social regeneration), the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) and the London Borough of Newham (LBN). Its primary aim, as set out in the Docklands SKILLNET Agreement, is to meet the education and training needs of local residents by complementing, rather than duplicating, existing provision. New types of training are required to raise the level of people's skills to match employment opportunities arising through redevelopment. 1986 saw the first round of a programme of short courses, offered by local education and training institutions (largely in the public sector) and commissioned by SKILLNET. The areas covered were electronics, computer literacy, office and keyboard skills and other subjects relevant to new employement opportunities. The courses, which were based on support from the European Social Fund (ESF), were intended for people under 25 who were currently unemployed (largely in consequence of the decline in traditional areas of work). These courses, known as Quick Start Initiative (QSI) courses, and their subsequent development through three further phases are the general subject of evaluation in this report.

The context of SKILLNET is of central importance: urban redevelopment in London's dockland has, amongst other things, generated the apparently paradoxical situation of high rates of unemployment amongst the indigenous population coupled with a rapid increase in job vacancies in non-traditional employment. Addressing this 'mismatch' is one of SKILLNET's main targets for its training work, and the research was intended to examine the following five areas of concern:

- occupational and educational needs in the area;
- curricula and learning methods used in the training courses (with particular reference to open learning);
- trainees' experiences, reactions and destinations;
- accreditation and progression;
- the contribution of SKILLNET in placing trainees into employment.

SKILLNET's attempts, through the QSI programme, to tackle these issues in the context of urban redevelopment were evaluated by the research. A copy of the Project Information Bulletin, which outlines the intended coverge, methods and outcomes of the research project, forms Appendix [A].

The research was commissioned by the Further Education Unit (FEU), as part of its REPLAN programme, in June 1987. The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) undertook the research, under the guidance of a steering committee whose membership is given in Appendix [B].

RESEARCH METHODS

A mixed methodology was adopted for the research, comprising interviews, observation and survey work in order to triangulate the views of different participant groups, including educationists, employers and trainees/ex-trainees. The survey work consisted of administering a postal questionnaire, which was sent out to all those people who had attended a course in the SKILLNET programme, and which covered their experiences

on the course and their employment and educational background, together with an indication of what they had gone on to do after the course. The administration of the questionnaire is explained in Appendix [C].

As a follow-up to this, personal interviews with a target number of 100 of those who had responded to the postal questionnaire were conducted, in order to track their careers more fully before and after their participation in SKILLNET training. The administration of these interviews is explained in Appendix [D]. Since this was an opportunity sample, the information gathered was used qualitatively to round out the survey data rather than in a numerical fashion. Copies of questionnaires and interview schedules are available on request from the NFER.

Interviews were also conducted with a range of people involved directly in SKILLNET and with people who could contribute other perspectives. Those in the first group were:

- some key personnel in the SKILLNET partnership (representatives from LBN, ILEA and the LDDC);
- staff at SKILLNET involved in the administration of the QSI courses;
- tutors, heads of department or managers in providing institutions;
- employers who had recruited trainees from the QSI courses through the SKILLNET recruitment service.

People in the second group were:

- representatives of local community and local schooling;
- ILEA Careers Service staff in Divisions 4 (Hackney) and 5 (Tower Hamlets);
- managers of a local employment agency and a local Job Centre;
- the manager of a dockland training agency not particpating in SKILLNET.

Visits to the majority of providing institutions were made and observation of a wide range of SKILLNET courses was undertaken. Lists of both institutions and courses are given in Appendix [E].

The questions surrounding accreditation of SKILLNET courses are examined both by empirical data from the survey and by referring to discussions with interviewees. An innovatory example of a draft SKILLNET syllabus in basic electronics is given in Appendix [F].

STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT

Issues which emerged during the course of research covered not only educational and operational ground but also the political context. Strongly contrasting views were elicited not only from policy-makers and educationists but also from the people who had taken the courses. In the case of the latter, the interplay between their previous expectations of SKILLNET and their actual experience of the courses appeared to be a major factor. As far as the policy-makers and educationists were concerned, the early history of SKILLNET and its particular context (the redevelopment of London's dockland) appear to have had a large bearing on their experiences and judgements. Differences of opinion have arisen over SKILLNET's agenda and dimensions, and have ranged from the extent of the geographical locality SKILLNET was intended to cover (see Appendix [G]), to the kinds of courses SKILLNET should be supporting and the precise nature of SKILLNET's potential service to dockland employers.

Given the importance of background factors in SKILLNET's original design and later development, there is a clear need to locate SKILLNET within its socio-economic and historical context and this has accordingly been sketched out in Chapter 2, where an outline of the major contrasts of opinion and experience is given. These are also discussed in later chapters in relation to the particular circumstances informing them.

Chapter 3 continues by exploring the kinds of occupational and educational needs which SKILLNET aims to address, and relates these to a more general set of questions about training and training provision in the docklands area. Chapter 4 looks at the operation of SKILLNET QSI courses in different participating institutions within the network. It illustrates how institutional variations may impinge on the delivery of training and its outcomes; and what mutual contributions and constraints are experienced by institutions and central administration respectively.

Chapter 5 examines the characteristics of SKILLNET trainees from Phases 1, 2 and 3 of the QSI programme according to information collected through the postal survey and follow-up interviews, and compares these data with basic information on the population from which SKILLNET trainees are drawn. Their experiences of the courses they took are examined against this background, and a general overview of their comments, problems and rewards is provided.

Chapter 6 discusses the outcomes of training through SKILLNET QSI courses according to the qualifications trainees could gain and the use they could put them to ('accreditation and progression'). A general framework for this discussion is sketched in at the start, together with some pointers to possible developments in SKILLNET accreditation. Chapter 7 takes up the issue of outcomes in terms of observable employment patterns among trainees. It relates this information both to the discussion of occupational needs covered in Chapter 3 and to the main features emerging from interviews with dockland employers.

Finally, Chapter 8 draws out the main implications from the research findings and indicates areas which might usefully form the basis for discussion and action in the future, as well as highlighting general messages for educational and training services.

2

BACKGROUND TO THE SKILLNET PROGRAMME

INTRODUCTION

As indicated in Chapter 1, a primary function for SKILLNET is to address what is perceived as the current mismatch between the kinds of job now available in the area and the levels and kinds of skill possessed by the local population. This 'mismatch' is seen as one of the major factors in the high level of local unemployment. SKILLNET aims to provide a service to unemployed local people by giving them accessible and relevant training opportunities. It also aims to liaise with employers about their training and recruitment needs. The chief executive of the LDDC at the time put it in these terms (Ward, 1985–6):

> *'Docklands SKILLNET – Docklands Educational and Training Network – is a collaborative venture between the LDDC, the Inner London Education Authority and the London Borough of Newham, which draws together the existing education and training institutions into a network serving local people and Docklands companies. SKILLNET will give individuals and companies increased access to the latest learning and training technologies and it will offer help to people regardless of their experience or qualification. The network also aims to help the many companies now moving to Docklands to train their employees and both the Department of Education and Science and the Manpower Services Commission are providing vital financial support to SKILLNET through a Local Collaborative Project.'*

The SKILLNET programme was conceived and developed in response to a particular set of circumstances, namely the wholesale redevelopment of an area whose major traditional industry had irretrievably collapsed. The context and mechanisms of redevelopment bear directly on the origins and operation of SKILLNET and are outlined in the next section.

An outline of SKILLNET's inception and early organisational development is presented in the third and fourth sections. The first types of courses to be offered under the banner of SKILLNET were known as the Quick Start Initiatives (QSIs) and a description of how they were set up is given in the following section. The implications of SKILLNET's background and origins for its development are summarised in the last section.

THE CONTEXT: DOCKLAND REDEVELOPMENT IN THE 1980s

Changes in the locality

The changes that have been taking place in London's dockland have been far-reaching, physically, economically and socially. Views about these changes and their impact differ in detail, but the extent of change is generally acknowledged. Barker (1986) describes how London's docks, developed over a century and a half, survived the Second World War to reach a new peak of activity in the 1960s. But then, as he describes:

> *'. . . larger vessels, containerization, and growing oil traffic caused more and more business to be handled downstream . . . Between the mid 60s and the mid 70s 150,000 jobs were lost as London's dockland was deserted.'*

Nicholson (1986) remarks on the social significance of this collapse in the following statement:

> *'For the majority of families whose livelihood depended on river trade activity, the abandonment of the upstream docks was as unexpected and destructive as a natural catastrophe. It was their Great Fire. They could only watch and accept the consequences of a process which they had no part in initiating and little chance of controlling.'*

By 1980, according to Ward (1986), Docklands was seen as:

> *'. . . London's backyard with over 2,500 acres of complete dereliction (nearly 50% of the area) . . . There were no trigger points for growth; it was a no-go area for private investment of all kinds. There was a total dependence on public-sector-funded programmes. The socio-political plans prepared compounded the very reasons why the area was declining . . . As a result, an almost complete economic void existed which had to be filled by areas of activity with future growth potential.'*

Not all local industry was dependent on the defunct docks, and people were often employed outside their residential borough (see Chapter 3 for a more detailed discussion of employment patterns). Nonetheless, the 'dockland' area, stretching from Southwark and Rotherhithe (Surrey Docks) in the west to Silvertown and North Woolwich (Royal Docks) in the east and including Wapping (St Katherine Docks and Shadwell Basin), Limehouse and the whole of the Isle of Dogs, had been pitched into an economic and social slump for which large-scale and radical solutions were deemed necessary.

The London Docklands Development Corporation

In July 1981 the Secretary of State for the Environment designated the London Docklands Development Corporation (LDDC) as the managing body of the Docklands Urban Development Area with the words (Ward, 1986):

> *'This transformation from decline to renewal . . . can only be achieved by a level of public expenditure that only the Exchequer can afford. London Docklands can only be successfully regenerated by a single-minded development agency.'*

That is to say, the Corporation was constituted with a remit to redevelop a large area impinging on three London boroughs (Tower Hamlets, Southwark and Newham) and directly affecting three others (Lewisham, Greenwich and Hackney) (see Appendix [G]). One of its intended functions was to bypass what were seen as inexpeditious bureaucratic practices and ideological hindrances in local authority planning provision, which Ward (1986) believed had led to *'a total dependence on public-sector-funded programmes'* and, as a result, to *'widespread cynicism and disbelief that anything could or would actually happen'*.

It was seen as crucial to dockland regeneration that industrial and commercial redevelopment, as well as provision for housing and recreation and leisure activities, should be funded by attracting in private investment on a large scale. New companies had to be persuaded to come to Docklands, and to stay. This was to be done by, in the words of Ward (1986), *'an organic approach based on a set of guiding principles, rather than a rigid, top-down, pre-ordained plan'*. By 1985–6, he reported, £1 billion had been invested; this rose to £2.2 billion by March 1987 (House of Commons reply, 13 January 1988).

Enterprise Zones

Within United Kingdom urban development areas, specific regenerative mechanisms such as the Enterprise Zones, of which there were 23, were put in place. Within the Docklands development area, the Isle of Dogs (in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets) was designated as an Enterprise Zone. As a recent report in *The Times* (31 December 1987) indicates, the zones

> *'comprise a key part of the Government's plans to regenrate the innercities and other run-down areas. Businesses receive exemption from rates and 100 per cent capital allowances for industrial and commercial properties. They also have relaxed planning controls, speedy handling of planning applications and fewer Government requests for statistical information. By last year* [1986], *there were 2,802 firms in the zones employing a total of 63,300 people . . .'*

Another feature of the Enterprise Zones is that there are no training levies. A recent report (*An Evaluation of the Enterprise Zone Experiment*, PA Cambridge Economic Consultants, 1987) names the Isle of Dogs Enterprise Zone as one of the most succesful. It is one of three which are reported to have had the advantage of being good locations in generally more prosperous regions. However, largely because there are doubts about the cost-efficiency of such blanket allowances (it is reported that each job in the Enterprise Zones has cost an estimated £23,000 to £30,000), the Secretary of State for the Environment announced in January 1988 that Enterprise Zones in England are not to be extended.

The agenda of 'urban redevelopment'

Different, in some cases conflicting, perspectives on the relationship between industrial redevelopment and social regeneration have played their part in shaping views about actual employment opportunities and in formulating approaches to training needs in the dockland area. It has turned out to be impossible, therefore, to consider SKILLNET's history and achievements in isolation from its particular context. Decisions concerning its development owed as much to events as to educational philosophy. One person who had been involved in SKILLNET's administration over a substantial period was concerned that educational issues tended to be relegated. This person also opined: *'the situation is unimaginably more complex than a person with imagination could have believed.'*

One of the salient factors is the wide range of responses generated by the intervention of the LDDC in matters previously within the brief of local authorities. At one end of the range is the view that the LDDC is giving opportunities to *'the enterprising who* [have] *the vision and imagination to adapt the area for the needs of the twenty-first century . . . The London Docklands Development Corporation is bringing new life to an area of over 5,000 acres . . .'* (Barker, 1986). At the other is the claim that the imposed 'remedy' – *'the creation of a democratically unaccountable authority'* – *'was the beginning of a process which we are now seeing driven to a bitter conclusion . . . The truth is that dockland is up for sale to the highest bidder.'* (Nicholson, 1986.)

Several interviewees commented on how political issues had been interwoven from the beginning into the tasks they faced and on the fact that a grasp of the education and training issues necessarily includes some grappling with political ones. One or two went further and expressed the belief that, in the context of SKILLNET, the political agenda came to dominate policy-making. The reasons for this are found only by looking at the larger picture. Competing interests and ideologies between national and local government are, in one sense, what the entire strategy of urban development corporations is about. On another level, conflicts between the perceived priorities of developers and those of the resident population (in respect of housing, jobs and amenities) have surfaced from time to time. *'A major barrier is the gulf of misunderstanding and mistrust between LDDC, developers and incoming business interests on*

the one hand and community based organisations on the other' (Baillie, 1988). This continuing malaise has also been frequently highlighted in the national media. Concern in some sections of the community has been such that an inquiry into the impact of LDDC redevelopment on job creation was initiated by the House of Commons Select Committee on Employment early in 1988. On the other hand, the LDDC's argument was that urgent action was required to ensure that redevelopment, once agreed to be necessary, could continue to progress despite countervailing political and bureaucratic pressures.

Relations between local authorities and representatives of the local communities on the one hand and the LDDC on the other have unsurprisingly shown signs of strain from time to time (see, for example, *Financial Times*, 17 February 1988). As an educationist who had been involved with SKILLNET policy more or less from the beginning, put it:

> *'the period of automatic hostility is at an end, but there is a residue of suspicion and some criticism of what has been done already . . . There is a feeling now that the urgent questions relate to people rather than structures . . . the battle for hearts and minds has still to be won.'*

This is the sensitive political backdrop for the SKILLNET programme, one of whose roles is to embody a partnership between the LDDC and the local authorities of ILEA and Newham.

SKILLNET'S BEGINNING

The education/ training problem

The general scenario of redevelopment has been touched on in the first section of this chapter. Converting acres of abandoned, derelict warehouses into a high-tech epicentre of the City – with all the physical, industrial, economic and social changes intended or entailed by such a policy – was the route towards regeneration taken by the LDDC. Its swift and radical redevelopment of London's dockland brought into sharp focus a longstanding problem, which may be said rather to consist of several interrelated and chronic problems. Broad agreement appears to exist over their nature and extent but different causes and attendant solutions have been proposed. A view which, in general terms, has much support is that a 'skills mismatch' has arisen between the demands of '*rapid technological industrial change and changing work patterns and the rapid technological advances in production and distribution methods generally*' on the one hand and '*numbers of poorly qualified school leavers, forming a poorly qualified labour force and a disproportionate number of unemployed*' on the other (Kennard, 1985). This reflects an earlier analysis adumbrated in the document *Technological Regeneration of Docklands* (LDDC, 1984), where '*the lack of good schools, both public and private, is seen as the biggest single limiting factor*' responsible for '*local educational shortfalls resulting in local people being unsuitable for new jobs being created in Docklands.*' Local unemployment rates meanwhile had risen to as high as 30 per cent in some wards (which might well account for some of the local community's adverse comment described in the previous section). A more detailed discussion of skills mismatch is included in Chapter 3.

The LDDC's policy on training, retraining and education has been to place them, at least in principle, near the centre of the redevelopment process:

> *'The Corporation . . . aims to provide the local workforce with the skills and training that will be in demand for the new jobs coming into the area.'* (Ward, 1986.)

'It will take designers and developers of stature to take on this enormous challenge but the rewards will be spectacular and the opportunities for training to provide new skills will be inherent in every major development initiative.' (Benson, 1985–6.)

It was clear to LDDC personnel that attracting new business people to the area and persuading them to stay depended on reassuring them that their generally negative expectations of the local skills base were, if not groundless, then open to changing circumstances. Education and training for new jobs in high-tech areas for service industries were thus seen as an immediate as well as a longer-term priority. The LDDC had no statutory remit or responsibilities to provide training or education but it did have powers under the Local Government and Planning and Land Act 1980, as well as under the Department of the Environment financial regime, to contribute to the expenditure undertaken by educational and training institutions.

For it was not, of course, as if educational/training provision, any more than the land itself, was a greenfield site. The redeveloping boroughs already offered a vast range of courses, full- and part-time, in vocational as well as academic areas, in a dozen further education establishments, half a dozen adult education institutes and two polytechnics, spread over something approaching one hundred centres. Anyone over the age of 16, with or without special needs, could in principle be accommodated on some kind of course at some level. The community college in Newham alone offered places to over 2,000 full-time students and nearly 15,000 part-timers in a year (representing roughly 8 per cent of the borough's population). Many courses were specifically aimed at unemployed people: *'. . . adult institutes are offering quick and personal help to unemployed people. There are opportunities to learn new skills, keep fit and active, plan for the future and keep in touch with education.'* (Source: *Floodlight* – ILEA guide to part-time day and evening classes in Inner London.) Some colleges also provided courses for workers on the Manpower Service Commission's (MSC's) Community Programme. There were a number of independently funded institutes which offered training in new technology, sometimes with specific aims of re-skilling local unemployed people or catering for people new to the UK with little or no English.

However, this very diversity of provision was, in the view of LDDC personnel and many educationists, more conducive to incoherence than to enriched opportunity. Staged progression through a series of inter-linking courses, such that an individual could build up a profile of connected and marketable skills, was not easy to achieve. People could end up confused and ill-informed about what form of provision would be most appropriate for their personal and career needs. Some way of rationalising and unifying post-16 provision seemed to be required and local providers began to explore possible initiatives. But there were growing pressures on the LDDC to assure prospective contractors and employers in the development area that a trained work-force would be available as required, and to reassure the local community that effective steps were being taken to counteract the high unemployment rate.

In 1985 the LDDC set up the Docklands Training Trust, which was to become the legal mechanism, separate from the LDDC and other partners, enabling SKILLNET to operate as a quasi-independent body. The appointment was also made of an educational consultant attached to the LDDC's High Technology Project Team. The primary objective for this appointment was a feasibility study for a high-technology training strategy for London's Docklands, which in effect would lead to the co-ordination of proposals for a Docklands Open College.

The 'London Docklands Open College'

A proposal had been made in *Technological Regeneration of Docklands* (LDDC, 1984) for a new training initiative, to be called the Docklands Open College, which would attempt to address the problems of training delivery as perceived by the LDDC. Also contained within the document were recommendations for 'Quick Start Initiatives' – not explicitly part of the Open College plan – the rationale for which arose out of:

> *'the need to make a prompt start on many areas . . . The almost daily announcement in the press of new science parks, high technology training centres, hi-tech business initiatives and modern conference and exhibition centres are all evidence of a need now. Piecemeal attempts to meet this need are being made on a scale far smaller than is envisaged in Docklands, but all are taking bites out of what could be a Docklands "one stop shop".'*

The recommendation was thus for immediate action: speed of progress was seen as vital to the success of technological regeneration and this appears to have been a constant motif in the LDDC's approach to planning at this stage. Economic rather than social regeneration, in other words, was the original driving force behind the LDDC strategy for training (an emphasis which changed, particularly as far as SKILLNET was concerned, partly because of the kinds of problem emerging from the QSI programme – see 'Background to SKILLNET QSI programme' later in this chapter).

The Docklands Open College was mooted publicly in an article in *Media in Education and Development* (Kennard, 1985), which built on the framework outlined in the LDDC's report.The author noted the large obstacles which in his view hindered relevant training of an adequate standard from being delivered:

- *'local people have poor access to training facilities which exist nearby'*
- '[the] *existing provision tends to be inflexible, rigidly structured, characterised by prescribed syllabuses, discrete subject boundaries, graded progression, set time limits and geared to accredited and qualification-achieving courses*'
- '[those leaving school at sixteen] *hold negative attitudes towards conventional educational institutions, industry and work . . .* [this] *serves to highlight the need for an attitudinal change toward the value of education and training.*'

Although the initial proposals for the Docklands Open College were to some extent superseded by events and policy changes, it is worth quoting from them if only because they seem to have laid the ground for subsequent developments. The Docklands Open College would, in Kennard's words:

> *'establish a flexible, integrated, open learning system, which is non-prescriptive, non-competitive and non-selective and which is well suited to respond sensitively to local industrial and communal training needs, while in turn encouraging and supporting further developments in Docklands.'*

He also envisaged the Docklands Open College acting as *'a focus and catalyst for a comprehensive open learning network'* and *'devising programmes of study tailor-made to satisfy the specific education and training needs of each individual learner, of the community and of local industry.'* Docklands Open College would therefore make innovatory advances in areas such as credit transfer, assessment procedures and accreditation; and it would promote flexibility in administration and course construction.

Implicit in these proposals was criticism of existing public-sector provision, and a highly ambitious role for the college in its own right was designated. It would provide distance-learning materials, including cable television transmissions; it would have world-wide teleconferencing and residential conferencing facilities and an international data bank. It would organise international conferences and facilitate international staff interchange. In-service training would be provided for all staff, including *'social, health-care and probation workers, police and fire services, voluntary workers, etc. utilising high technology training facilities.'* (Kennard, 1985.)

Open learning systems from the Open University and the Open Tech (an open learning initiative set up by the MSC) were to be utilised to help students accumulate credits for the purposes of direct transfer. The prescriptions of the programme were intended to provide a transferable model *'for an integrated approach to the training needs of any area . . . given the will and the ability to confront a challenge which is bold and visionary in its conception and far-reaching in its implementation.'* (Kennard, 1985.)

Accounts garnered from interviewees about SKILLNET's emergence out of the plan for a Docklands Open College vary somewhat, both in content and relative emphases. This is no doubt partly because there were changes of personnel over time: some of the key figures in the early stages were no longer connected with SKILLNET by the time of the evaluation. Additionally, perspectives of interviewees presumably differed according to their different roles and responsbilities. The 'story' of SKILLNET is therefore broadly narratable, but some differences of detail were not reconciled in the lifetime of the evaluation.

The existing public-sector providers of education and training in the area, ILEA and LBN, found the proposals for the Docklands Open College neither realistic nor relevant to the needs of local people. In some quarters, outright hostility greeted the recommendations. Because of government rate-capping measures, these authorities were short of precisely the kind of resources being mooted for the Docklands Open College. One account of the sequence of events suggests that when the training proposals became public, representations were made by ILEA to the effect that if the LDDC were to set up an educational institution, this would be to undertake a statutory responsibility normally within the brief of ILEA – and therefore in effect to compete with ILEA. The outcome of this challenge is said to have established that ILEA (and subsequently LBN) had a central role in any discussions about the Docklands Open College. It also, according to Church and Ainley (1986), provided a timely chance for the local authorities to have a share in resources denied to them through rate-capping.

A gloss on this account of the background to the participation of ILEA and LBN points to a different set of motivations. An application to the ESF (see next section) had been made in 1985 by the Docklands Training Trust to support training provision in the dockland area: the grant, if awarded, would make 1,000 training places available. The Trust had, it is believed, made the bid without consulting ILEA or LBN, but only the local education authorities (LEAs) had the capacity to deliver training on the scale envisaged. ILEA and LBN agreed to collaborate in the venture, provided that the LDDC agree not to designate itself as a training provider.

Yet a third view states that it was always the intention of the LDDC to collaborate with the LEAs and that the Corporation agreed to change the title of the Docklands Open College, which might misleadingly have suggested a free-standing institution, in deference to the expressed

anxieties of the authorities. The aims and objectives of the project, however, are said to have remained constant and were subsequently embodied in the partnership agreement.

It is clear that, whatever the reasons, the relationship between the three parties was initially uneasy. Discussions – which were sometimes understandably beset with difficulties – continued at senior level between representatives of ILEA, LBN and the LDDC throughout the rest of 1985 and into 1986. A secondment was made from ILEA to fill the post of project leader.

The SKILLNET agreement

These discussions eventually enabled partnership proposals to be formally drafted and in May 1986 an agreement – DOCKLANDS SKILLNET 1986 – was signed by the three sponsors. (The document was somewhat revised in December 1987: see Appendix [H].) A new name for the project – DOCKLANDS SKILLNET – was agreed and its role was to be the facilitating mechanism for the training provision. One effect of the agreement was to distance SKILLNET, at least in public perception, from the LDDC, which – given the controversy then surrounding the corporation – was felt by some of those involved to be no bad thing.

The document is quoted in some detail here because it formed the basis for the QSI programme. In principle, the LDDC agreed to provide the means to support provision of training, which would be delivered through local educational institutions in the public sector, with private-sector involvement where necessary. The document's purpose was to bring some clarity to the responsibilities and powers of the three sponsors. Accordingly it specified the aims of the project, its government and management arrangements and its legal identity.

It should be noted that, in the opinion of several interviewees with considerable experience of SKILLNET policy making and administration, it was a major achievement for the three partners – the LDDC, ILEA and LBN – to have established this collaborative base and to have continued to support its operation in the face of the external and internal difficulties already mentioned.

INITIAL ORGANISATION, ADMINISTRATION AND FUNDING ARRANGEMENTS OF *DOCKLANDS SKILLNET*

Aims, government and legal identity of SKILLNET

The aims for SKILLNET were divided into two categories, the purposes and the forms of co-operation. The purposes were:

- *'to meet the education and training needs of local residents and to raise skill levels where necessary to match new employment opportunities'*;
- *'to use resources effectively and avoid duplication of provision'*;
- *'to provide skills relevant to the local economy'*;
- *'to promote and encourage more flexible access to training through the development of non-standard entry, credit accumulation and transfer and through other means, e.g. child care provision'*;
- *'to increase training in high technology skills'*;
- *'to relate market research to course and staff development'*;
- *'to promote learning using new technology'*.

The forms of co-operation were to be:

- *'to establish an exchange or brokerage for the providers of education/training, actual or potential students and other groups, e.g. employers and validating bodies'*;
- *'to give priority to developing new provision to meet identified need'*;
- *'to establish a partnership between the sponsors and their institutions in order to meet changing local needs for education/training'*;
- *'to distinguish specific roles of sponsoring bodies'.*

  'The LDDC will concentrate on seeking additional development funds and on providing local labour market and other intelligence which will include overall training needs and employer trends as well as specific employer needs, without however diverting significant resources away from the delivery of service to local employers and residents. (The LDDC will not make direct provision of education and training.)

  'The two LEAs will develop and change provision within their own institutions. (Providers of education and training, other than LBN and ILEA, will be encouraged to contribute to the developing work of SKILLNET and to make agreed direct provision.)'

These aims will be re-examined in Chapter 8 in the light of the evaluation's findings.

Government and management arrangements were to be embedded in a two-tier system on the grounds that while *'the exact nature of any developments cannot be known'* it was nonetheless necessary *'to ensure that future decisions can be made expeditiously'*. The government of the project would therefore be undertaken by a Policy Board meeting quarterly while the day-to-day management of the project would be undertaken by an Executive Group informed by an Advisory Board. The Policy Board would consist of five LEA members (three ILEA and two Newham), five appointed by the LDDC (a maximum of two from the LDDC itself) and one representative of the residential community. The Director of SKILLNET (a full-time post eventually filled in March 1987) would act as Secretary to the Board. She/he would also be Chair of the Executive Group, whose members were to be designated by ILEA, the LDDC and LBN. The Advisory Board, also meeting quarterly, would comprise representatives of the local providing institutions, the MSC, the LEAs and the LDDC together with representatives of the resident community, industry and commerce. Its role included keeping SKILLNET in touch with the resident and employer communities, advising on proposed schemes and assisting with the use of existing networks. (The Employers Task Force associated with the MSC Local Collaborative Project also supported the Policy Board in a consultative role.)

There was a rationale for this dual level of responsibility, which might prima facie appear cumbersome:

> *'the co-operation outlined above is designed to ensure a fast and relevant response from the education and training institutions to meet the needs of local residents, workers and employers'.*

However, it seems that in practice the forms of government and management which were *'designed . . . to facilitate the sponsors' co-operative effort'* failed to realise that intention intially. Some members of the Policy Board in particular commented during the evaluation on a tendency towards a blurring of roles – one example given was that the executive powers awarded to the Executive Group gave the impression of cutting across the policy-making powers of the Policy Board, which tended to meet rather infrequently at first. Subsequently, however, the relationship between the two arms was in practice clarified.

Legal arrangements were to be made in two stages because discussions on the permanent, most appropriate form had yet to be instituted. It was suggested that SKILLNET could be constituted as a Charitable Trust or a Company, an educational charity, limited by guarantee.

SKILLNET's legal identity should:

> *'provide it with a degree of independence and control but . . . also define its limitations . . . i.e. it would not become an alternative or competing* provider *of education and training. Its role would be that of facilitator'.*

On the other hand some arrangement for implementing the project needed to be immediately in place. A Joint Officers Steering Group was therefore to be formed, with terms of reference which enabled it, amongst other things, to secure approval of the sponsors to the Agreement, to establish a permanent legal identity for SKILLNET, to set arrangements in motion for appointing a Director and to inform participant institutions of present and future developments. The Steering Group effectively became the Executive Group.

It decided in 1986 to register SKILLNET as a charity set up by the LDDC, with trustees appointed from the LDDC. This in turn generated an 'ownership' question: what was the relationship, for instance, between the trustees, legally responsible for SKILLNET, and the Policy Board, designated as the supreme governing body? Thus in an LDDC brochure *London Docklands for High Technology* (undated), Docklands SKILLNET is said to *'work hand in hand with Docklands companies, which specify their current and future manpower skill requirements and SKILLNET provides the trained workforce to order.'* Given the exploratory tone of the terms of the agreement, this could be said to be a somewhat premature announcement (and perhaps a legacy from the Docklands Open College recommendations).

SKILLNET's funding arrangements: ESF eligibility criteria

The Department of the Environment, through the LDDC, made £1 million available to SKILLNET in 1986 as pump-priming money. This was immediately committed for the first five years' administrative support of SKILLNET. Also in 1986 the MSC granted £100,000 for the first year of the Local Collaborative Project and £29,000 was contributed by the private sector (Bann, 1987a).

Although the partnership agreement of May 1986 gave SKILLNET a legal existence, the ESF monies – applied for, on the basis of recommendations made in *Technological Regeneration of Docklands* (LDDC, 1984), by the Docklands Training Trust in August 1985 – were paid to the LDDC. SKILLNET expenses were paid via the LDDC, and SKILLNET did not take over full control of its own finances until April 1988. For the programme of short courses being planned, the UK public sector – in the form of the LDDC, ILEA and LBN – was to provide resources to 'match' the ESF money. The Fund is designated for use in urban areas to support training initiatives designed to address problems of skills shortages. The eligibility criteria for receiving ESF money were:

- 1,000 student places had to be filled;
- students had to be below the age of 25;
- the courses had to start in 1986 and be completed by December of that year;
- the courses had to consist of a minimum of 200-hour modules, of which 100 hours were to be class contact time and 100 hours 'independent' learning;
- the courses had to contain an element of the 'new technology'.

This funding was the basis for the first round of courses offered by SKILLNET, which were to be called, in echo of the recommendations contained in *Technological Regeneration of Docklands* (LDDC, 1984), Quick Start Initiatives (see next section). Amongst other things, it meant that course proposals had to be designed and approved in a very short time and independent learning materials either specially written, commissioned or bought in. Students were to be paid an allowance on the basis of their attendance; colleges were to be paid on the basis of how many students were enrolled on their courses. Course development costs were treated separately: colleges were to be reimbursed for these by SKILLNET, on receipt of an invoice from the college, to the sum of 50 per cent of the invoice or to the sum agreed at the outset, whichever was the smaller.

It should be noted that the conditions attached to the ESF grant encouraged SKILLNET training provision to take a particular direction which did not command unanimous assent; and which, under the proposed 1988 SKILLNET contract, would be altered by reducing SKILLNET's financial dependency on the Fund.

An additional pressure on the initial financial arrangements was that the ESF and MSC monies were paid in arrears. Late in 1986 the trustees agreed to allow SKILLNET to draw on the LDDC grant ahead of schedule. Furthermore, difficulties with the QSIs (see next section) meant that SKILLNET was unlikely to be able to claim the ESF grant for 1986 or 1987 in full. If these trends were to continue, SKILLNET's shortfall would be £4.5 million by the end of the ensuing five-year period (Bann, 1987a). Additional funding was therefore sought and it was proposed that the LDDC should submit a funding application to the Department of the Environment for financial support.

SKILLNET's staffing arrangements

A staffing plan was not specified in the original agreement, apart from the Director's post. The project leader seconded from ILEA had established the first round of QSIs, with funding from the ESF. He had been granted a second year of secondment in his post as project leader, but did not proceed. In the period 1986–7, most of the key personnel, apart from the Director, continued to be appointed on a secondment basis. This had two main outcomes. First, the secondees were responsible to their seconding employers and thus brought differences of institutional perspective with them. A report by one of the seconding employers related a concern that SKILLNET's objectives had not always corresponded to its own. Secondly, because most appointments were on a temporary basis, continuity of personnel and security of tenure were not built into staffing arrangements.

New team structures were proposed and other staff appointments made as SKILLNET developed – through the QSI programme and through the Local Collaborative Project – and expanded into further premises. The proposed 1988 contract was supported by a planned further increase in staffing.

Subsequent changes

Shortly after taking up post in March 1987, SKILLNET's Director proposed changes of policy and implementation regarding course curricula, staffing and support levels, relations with employers and funding arrangements (Bann, 1987a). The proposed funding arrangement is given above – that is, a request for £4.5 million over five years. The LDDC commissioned an appraisal of these plans and the resulting report recommended that '*conditional on SKILLNET being compatible with the future direction of LDDC's policies regarding education, training and social investment, LDDC should consider investing in SKILLNET in line with the forward plan*' (Gaunt and Austin, 1987).

In February 1988 a newly negotiated contract was drafted between the LDDC and SKILLNET which was intended to resolve inherited ambiguities. The contract, based in part on the 'Forward Plan' and its independent appraisal, was drafted in accordance with recommendations made in a consultative document drawn up the previous autumn under the auspices of the recently established Health, Education and Training Programmes in the LDDC's Social Facilities Programmes Unit. It was proposed, amongst other things, that SKILLNET become a company limited by guarantee, with trustees drawn from the three sponsoring bodies. Much of the substance of the agreement pertained to guaranteed funding of SKILLNET by the LDDC which would result in tighter financial accountability on the part of SKILLNET.

BACKGROUND TO *SKILLNET* QSI PROGRAMME

Phase 1: course design and recruitment

The QSIs were short courses intended to equip local unemployed people under the age of 25 with the sorts of skills they would need for the new jobs in dockland.

For the first round of course design and recruitment, a very quick turn-around was entailed because of the timetable demanded by the ESF funding schedule described in the previous section. Confirmation of the grant came at the beginning of June 1986 for courses to be offered in the autumn, with the college summer vacation stretching over most of July and August. The principals of colleges in the area were then approached by the project leader for course proposals to be drafted, returned and approved by the end of June. Forty-three 200-hour modules were offered for September 1986, at 11 institutions, in curriculum areas such as business studies, computer literacy, word-processing and office skills, electronics, catering, construction and motor vehicle maintenance (see Appendix [E]). Courses were of variable length (from three to six months, generally) and starting dates were different in different establishments.

Marketing specialisists were employed to design a marketing strategy, on the grounds that since SKILLNET's trainee clientele had already rejected 'normal' further education the programme had to be presented in a new way. A major advertising campaign, including coverage on radio and television, was mounted and glossy brochures were produced, announcing '*Job help for all*' and '*A passport to new skills*'. Enrolment, conducted by the secondees from ILEA Careers Service, started on 1 July. There were around 3,000 initial inquiries in response to the campaign, many of which came from people who turned out, by reason of age or residence, to be ineligible for SKILLNET courses. Educational practitioners have since commented on what they term the 'irresponsibility' of mounting this scale of recruitment without a correspondingly substantial commitment to counselling provision. What happended, for example, to the 2,000 or so people who inquired about but were not enrolled for a SKILLNET course? Their interest was clearly stimulated by the campaign and they ought perhaps to have been directed to courses elsewhere. Discussion of the outcomes of SKILLNET's advertising and recruitment procedures is included in subsequent chapters. Although it was not intended that recruitment should be undertaken by colleges themselves (except, retrospectively, by 'infilling' SKILLNET courses which were under-subscribed at the start of a session), it appears that in one case an institution's staff were involved in recruitment. Indeed, differing perceptions about the way responsibilities were, or should be, shared between institutions and SKILLNET have emerged as a theme in the evaluation.

The time-scale and scale of operation together meant that course criteria were not properly specified and proposals not adequately designed and compared with each other. Not all those who enrolled received counselling. There was no provision for designating this initiative a pilot scheme and for ensuring its evaluation. It was becoming clear by early October, however, that although the target of 1,000 trainee enrolments had been reached, many of those who had enrolled did not in the event turn up for their courses; many more dropped out as time went on. Colleges were asked to send reminders to trainees who failed to turn up, but it was not clear that they were given the support and information needed to carry this out. This meant that little or no follow-up was undertaken of the 750 trainees who had dropped out of their courses by the end.

It remained the view of the LDDC, however, that the scale and speed of turn-around had been entirely necessary: an early momentum had been established for the QSI programme in respect of funding and publicity and it was feared that any loss of impetus might have undermined the project.

Subsequent phases

Phase 2 (starting in February 1987) had to be put in place almost as quickly, and certainly before evidence about Phase 1 could be conclusively examined, although some changes were made. This was partly because of the differing course length alluded to above. Recruitment for Phase 2 began in January 1987. Letters asking what courses they could offer for Phase 2 were sent at the beginning of October to principals of colleges participating in Phase 1, although the outcome of the ESF application for 1987 would not be known until April of that year. Replies to this request were due in by mid-October, or the end of October at the latest. Phase 3 (starting in April/May 1987) underwent considerable modification, especially with respect to recruitment and counselling procedures and the number of participating institutions, which was smaller than previously. Phase 4 (starting in September/October 1988) was a large undertaking, comparable in number of courses offered to Phase 1.

It is the development of the QSI programme as exemplified in these different phases which is reported on in detail in subsequent chapters. Each chapter looks at a different issue or aspect of the provision and comparisons betweens phases are made where appropriate.

SUMMARY

The SKILLNET programme was presented as a high-tech, large-scale, fast-moving response from the LDDC to what was perceived as a 'skills mismatch' problem brought about by the decline and radical redevelopment of the dockland area (the 'Docklands Open College'). The enterprise evolved into a three-way partnership between the LDDC, ILEA and LBN which had responsibility for Docklands SKILLNET, whose role was clarified as its constituting a facilitator rather than a provider of training. Funding for a programme of short training courses – QSIs – was obtained from the ESF; this funding had certain conditions attached to it which influenced both the curricula and their targetting. Colleges and other providing institutions which could come back with relevant course proposals in the very short time available were invited to be part of the network providing QSI courses. The history of SKILLNET, therefore, would suggest that the programme was instigated in response to a particular set of socio-economic circumstances and to particular perceptions of educational and training needs in the dockland area. Thereafter it evolved as a result of decisions taken in response to a series of events and their consequences, led by ESF funding regulations, rather than as a planned implementation of an educational philosophy supported by specific evidence both of local people's needs and of what was realistically providable.

3

IDENTIFYING NEEDS: EMPLOYERS AND TRAINEES

INTRODUCTION

The development of SKILLNET's training programme has been prompted by a generally agreed need to make an impact on current and future dockland employment patterns – from both employers' and local residents' points of view – by the infusion of relevant training opportunities (see Chapter 1). Some sifting of the issues integral to this aim is called for. What ideas have shaped attempted solutions of the problem: the paradoxical situation of high local unemployment coupled with labour shortages in the new dockland firms (the next two sections)? What are the impinging realities, the occupational and the educational contours of this changing environment (the fourth and fifth sections)? In summarising the chapter, the assumptions on which the SKILLNET programme was originally based are examined and the possible implications for SKILLNET of pressures to fulfil the needs of employers and of trainees simultaneously and through the mechanism of training are noted (final section).

IDENTIFYING THE PROBLEM: 'Skills mismatch'?

What is 'skills mismatch'?

The impression has sometimes been given that it was a straightforward matter, in theory at least, for SKILLNET to provide a service to both employers and trainees, as the following quotation suggests:

> *'SKILLNET works hand in hand with Docklands companies, which specify their current and future manpower skill requirements and SKILLNET provides the trained workforce to order.'* (LDDC, undated.)

Although the claim was perhaps more an expression of intent than of reality, the situation was much more complex than it implies.

One of SKILLNET's major tasks has been to address the problems of high local unemployment on the one hand and the increasing number of both notified and projected job vacancies in the redevelopment area on the other. Unemployment in the LDDC area *'has risen to . . . more than twice the Greater London rate – despite severe skills shortages.'* (*Building*, 11 December 1987.) Meanwhile *'Jobs are going begging in Docklands, but bosses just cannot find enough workers. That's the message from many companies who are facing an uphill task trying to fill vacancies. But despite extensive efforts to recruit staff, many Docklands firms say they cannot get enough employees with the right qualifications.'* (*Docklands News*, January 1988.)

Many people explain this paradoxical situation by reference to 'skills mismatch': the phenomenon of unemployment is related, at least in part, to the 'unemployability' of those who are unemployed because they lack the right kind or level of education or skills for the jobs available.

This is an increasingly widespread thesis used by policy-makers. Thus, for instance, the White Paper *Training for Employment* (Department of Employment, 1988) identifies three *'major problems which need to be tackled if more and more unemployed people are to get back into work'*. The paper states that job-seekers *'lack the skills needed to fill the jobs our economy is generating'* and that *'many longer term unemployed people . . . lack the motivation to take up a job, training or other opportunities'*.

(The third problem is that significant numbers of claimants are said to be '*not genuinely available for work.*')

However, its validity as an explantory concept needs to be examined rather than simply assumed.

What is the evidence supporting 'skills mismatch' as an explanation?

Previous research suggests that people with the lowest levels of qualification are those most likely to be unemployed, particularly if they are long-term unemployed (White, 1983; Rigg, 1988) and evidence from the postal questionnaire appears to substantiate this (see Chapter 6). If qualifications can be taken as a guide to people's levels of education and training and if improving these is likely to enhance their chances of getting a job, it is prima facie plausible to postulate 'training' as the missing term in the equation. Training can be seen as a mechanism by which individuals can increase their employability. Such an idea is clearly even more cogent when job vacancies are on the increase.

The 'skills' which unemployed people are purported to lack are often separated into categories:

- specific technical skills;
- (more broadly) job-hunting and interview skills;
- (more generally still) personal, life and social skills.

Thus a remedy for lack of skills is to provide training opportunities at each of these levels, on the assumption that when the diagnosis is clear, the individual can be motivated to seek the cure. This was the general thrust of Kennard's (1985) analysis of the problem for which the Docklands Open College (with its individually tailored learning packages) was to have been the solution. The operation of SKILLNET since then would seem to have been *de facto* in line with the 'skills mismatch' idea and this is what most people who were interviewed (on both the education and employment sides) explicitly or implicitly regarded as a workable definition of the problem.

However, different people appeared to have different aspects of such a definition in mind. No single interpretation could be propounded with certainty. Moreover, a straightforward view of skills mismatch and its practical application to questions of training provision are open to question, as is argued in the fourth and fifth sections of this chapter.

IDENTIFYING THE PROBLEM: 'ATTITUDES'?

Suggestions that the problem of unemployment could be partially attributed to lack of interest, enthusiasm or commitment on the part of unemployed people have only occasionally been made by interviewees in the course of the survey, and not by any particular group of people. It might be alleged that the relatively low response rate – 40 per cent – to the questionnaire sent out to trainees (see Appendices [C] and [D]) is itself confirmation of trainees' lack of interest; but one would have to eliminate other factors first. No evidence from the questionnaire or later interview responses suggested, meanwhile, that apathy is a widespread attitude; frustration, anxiety, disappointment and diffidence, however, were evident (see Chapter 5). SKILLNET counsellors suggested that such feelings on the part of trainees may sometimes superficially manifest themselves as apathy, indicating a need for sensitive exploration of the underlying reality.

Evidence from other surveys does not support the theory of apathy as a contributory factor in the problem of unemployment. Surveys of young adults in the labour market show that their aspirations tend to be both realistic and flexible; and that their job-search strategies are, on the whole, appropriate for their circumstances (Roberts et al., undated; Ashton and Maguire, undated; McRae, 1987). Furthermore, it may even be, as Ashton and Maguire argue, that young people's attitudes towards training are related to the buoyancy of the job market: *'If employment levels deteriorate, attitudes towards training are likely to become more negative; if, however, the job situation improves, then the demand for training from young adults is likely to increase . . .'*

Some other research (for example, Ullah, 1987) also concludes that the social context in which unemployment occurs is important. In the case of young black people, for example, *'. . . it is necessary to understand how they live and organize their lives, the importance they attach to their blackness, how they view British society in general, the way in which racism has impinged on their life chances and their own interpretations of this . . .'*

The evidence is not therefore strong that widespread apathy among individuals is a contributory factor in unemployment.

OCCUPATIONAL CONTOURS IN DOCKLAND

Urban deprivation and unemployment

The import of 'skills mismatch' – together with the suggestion that social context plays a part in the experience of unemployment – means that the local contours of occupational characteristics and educational achievement ought to be considered in relation to urban deprivation. This report offers an impressionistic view which is substantiated to some extent by statistics taken from a variety of sources.

Nineteen of the 35 most deprived wards in London (Townsend et al., 1987) fall within SKILLNET's catchment area ('deprivation' here is calculated from four indicators: unemployment, overcrowding, rented accommodation, non-ownership of car). The unemployment rates in these wards in 1981 varied between 15 per cent (lowest) and 22 per cent (highest); by 1986 these had risen to 19 per cent and 32 per cent.

Within these figures:

> *'unemployment rates among Asian groups were about half as much again as, and among West Indian groups about twice, the average. In the last five years the average unemployment rate has nearly doubled and it may be assumed that the differential between blacks and whites is certainly no less and is likely to be larger. This is implied by the exceptionally large increase in unemployment in London wards known to have a high proportion of the population who are black . . .'* (Townsend et al., 1987.)

There are further observations to be made, such as that 'unemployment' is a flow, not a stock – it affects many more people than those who are unemployed at any one time. The length of periods of unemployment has also to be taken into account: the longer a person is out of work, the harder it is to get back in, particularly at the same occupational level, as White (1983) argues: *'There is no doubt that the jobs to which the long term unemployed were returning were usually among the low paid. The new jobs . . . had similar characteristics to those which are supposed to mark out secondary employment, notably insecurity and lack of investment in training or development.'*

A social survey of one of the dockland areas, the Isle of Dogs, (Wallman et al., 1987) showed that nearly 70 per cent of unemployed people had been out of work for over a year; nearly 50 per cent of the unemployed had been out of work for over three years or had never worked at all. The authors note that 20 per cent of unemployed people covered by this earlier survey were not registered as such: this provides confirmation of arguments elsewhere that figures based on registered unemployed do not reveal the entire extent of unemployment. The same survey shows that 21 per cent of people aged between 16 and 25 were unemployed; they represented over 40 per cent of all registered unemployed people in the area, again a confirmation of the general inner city pattern. However, of those not registered, this age group '*represents those who are most actively still looking for work*,' providing yet another indication that apathy is not a strong factor.

More recent figures (Janaury 1988) for local unemployment rates are given in Chapter 5.

Strutural changes in the labour market

The dockland areas of London are also the ones which have lost the greatest number of manufacturing jobs for manual workers in the last 15 years. Increased competition from foreign markets and the relocation of firms in greenfield sites outside the conurbation have been major factors in this phenomenon. The contraction of the manufacturing and engineering sector has continued, while jobs in banking, insurance and finance have increased both relatively and absolutely (Harrison, 1983; Friend and Metcalf, 1982; Townsend et al., 1987). Jobs in the finance sector are part of national as opposed to local labour markets and are characterised by a high level of qualifications and skills. Thus the jobs which have increased numerically would tend not to be available to local unemployed people, while the jobs available to them have decreased numerically.

In Tower Hamlets in particular, in the 20 years from 1961 to 1981, there was a 76 per cent decrease in the number of people employed in manufacturing, a 136 per cent increase in the number employed in the service sector and an overall drop of 40 per cent in all jobs. This was partly the result of the demise of the docks (as was outlined in Chapter 2), but '*many factors have contributed to this decline* [in traditional occupations]'. '*Lack of room to expand has resulted in plant relocation, a process encouraged by central government policies relating to regional assistance and new towns development.*' The requirement in the 1950s and 1960s to repair war damage '*disrupted the activities of many firms*'. The recession of the 1980s '*has had a disproportionate effect on the local economy because of the concentration of small firms*' which were hardest hit (Tower Hamlets, 1985). In other words, local employment trends are not simply the result of dock-related closures and subsequent redevelopment.

Occupational effects on the population

The above-mentioned shifts have implications for the employment of people living in these areas, particularly those employed or seeking work in occupational areas which have contracted.

In Tower Hamlets, for example, the percentage of jobs at a semi-skilled or unskilled level was reported to be 23 per cent in 1987, whereas the proportion of the population who were unskilled or partly skilled was reported as being between 29 and 32 per cent. Moreover, the highest proportion of semi-skilled and unskilled jobs – over half – in 1987 was to be found in the manufacturing sector, which is the one contracting at the fastest rate. The next highest – nearly 40 per cent – was in the storage, distribution and transport sector, which is partly dependent on manufacturing. The fewest unskilled and semi-skilled jobs were in the office-based sector (less than 2 per cent), which is the most rapidly

expanding sector. Incoming firms, such as newspaper, finance and data-processing companies, were making new demands on the labour-force (Tym and Partners, 1987). This view is arguably supported by figures for Isle of Dogs residents currently in work, of whom the greatest number (23 per cent) have clerical jobs, while those working in manual jobs constitute 13 per cent, which is a lower figure than those 18 per cent working in professional/managerial posts (Wallman et al., 1987).

The employment effects of redevelopment

At present, specific employment effects of redevelopment are hard to assess and there is a wide range of judgement on the issue. Generally, it would appear that redevelopment has continued previous trends but at a more rapid pace. With regard to job creation, estimates by the LDDC were of 8,000 jobs created, 50 per cent of which went to people living in Tower Hamlets. These figures were based on an employment survey (Research Bureau Ltd., 1985), which confirmed that '*the new arrivals are predominantly services establishments*'. There was also a marked shift in relative size of firms '*with greater emphasis on small establishments*'. It found that '*Docklands based establishments are more optimistic about employment prospects than industry nationally* [and about] *future expansion*'. Other reports, however, claim to show that redevelopment has so far had a deleterious effect on local employment prospects. One survey (Tym and Partners, 1987), for example, has evidence that in 1987 only 20 per cent of jobs on the Isle of Dogs were taken by residents of Tower Hamlets, and only half of these by people actually living on the island, though in interpreting these figures one would have to take into account the fact that Londoners generally tend to work in boroughs other than their residential ones. It was the firms that had been in the area before 1981 that employed the highest numbers of local people – twice as many as the new firms. Just under another fifth of workers on the Isle of Dogs came from other parts of London, while over a third of workers came from outside London, principally from Kent and Essex.

Generally speaking, redevelopment has so far continued the shift from manufacturing to service, particularly financial sectors, although clearly the massive rebuilding programme has created large numbers of jobs in the construction industry and will continue to do so, if present plans are fulfilled, for the next two decades. It should, however, be noted that only 4 per cent of Isle of Dogs residents currently working were found to be employed in construction jobs, though this figure many not reflect actual numbers employed on a casual basis. Similarly, predictions that security jobs would increase have not been borne out so far, at least as far as residents are concerned (Wallman et al., 1987).

Some commentators are concerned that the shift away from manufacturing represents an imbalance in the economy with grave implications for stable employment prospects, while others view it as an indication of the growing economic health of the area.

Press reports of a study commissioned by the LDDC (Peat Marwick McLintock, 1987) suggested that local unemployment has risen by 30 per cent in the redevelopment area since 1981 when the Corporation was created. According to press reports, criticism has been made of the Corporation for spending public money (reports of the amount vary from £2.2 million to £4.6 million) on training without having a clear policy on future skills needs and training provision. Criticism was also said to have been levelled at the construction industry and its training board, the CITB, for failing to train and recruit local labour (*Independent*, 7 December 1987; *Daily Telegraph*, 8 December 1987; *Building*, 11 December 1987; *East London Advertiser*, 11 December 1987). The Peat Marwick McLintock report remained confidential at the time of writing and therefore unavailable for first-hand examination. It is understood, however, that the CITB had taken account of the criticisms it contains and were moving towards a policy on local recruitment.

A House of Commons inquiry is currently being undertaken by the Select Committee on Employment, to examine the impact on local employment of all the UK urban development corporations, but of the LDDC in particular. A report is expected some time in the first half of 1988. An update of the Research Bureau Ltd survey for the LDDC is also shortly expected.

There is perhaps an issue of time-scale in all this: the LDDC, by virtue of its brief, tends to emphasise the future picture, whereas local residents, and particularly the unemployed amongst them, are understandably concerned with the present situation. They do not necessarily anticipate personal advantage from future changes. Providers of education and training have also perforce to live in the present, while acknowledging that the next decade is likely to bring large-scale change. Such differences in time-scale may encourage different interpretations of current circumstances.

Future employment trends

According to LDDC figures in 1986, a projected 33,000 jobs were envisaged by 1991, which would rise to 78,000 if the Canary Wharf project developed as hoped (LDDC *Annual Report and Accounts*, 1985–6).

More recently, reports have been commissioned on job-market forecasts in different sectors by various interested parties. These findings are far from conclusive in their overall projections. Reports commissioned by firms of estate agents, for example, seem to contradict one another. One report cast 'considerable' doubt on the continued attractiveness of Docklands for City firms considering relocation and forecast a massive over-supply of office space in the Isle of Dogs, particularly in the light of possible cuts in UK staffing of foreign companies (report commissioned by Morgan Pepper 1988, *Evening Standard*, 27 January 1988). A second report (*Daily Telegraph*, 22 December 1987) foresaw a possible disincentive to relocation in the continuing access and transport problems to the area. However, yet another survey judged that Docklands was becoming '*an increasingly important area for office decentralisation from central London*' (*Planning*, 29 January 1988). It is by no means certain, in any case, that relocation will have any beneficial results for local residents if the trend continues for personnel to be transferred along with the relocating firms (for example, Tym and Partners, 1987). Such diversity of evidence, implying *inter alia* high market volatility, is clearly a major problem for organisations like SKILLNET which would want to plan their provision according to reliable estimates of long-term employer requirements. This uncertainty is underlined by Tym and Partners (1987), who suggested that over a third of firms (largely older ones) then situated on the Isle of Dogs expected to be relocating outside the island within the next year; others (both old and new) expressed anxieties about staying. A report commissioned by SKILLNET themselves suggested a figure of anywhere between 60,000 and 120,000 new jobs over the next decade.

A further cause for concern, in the view of some commentators, is the number of foreign banks and securities firms in London (534 at present, compared wth 356 in New York; *Evening Standard*, 27 January 1988), which could make local employment vulnerable to subsequent company relocation abroad.

A study which would analyse the skills needed by prospective employers in the leisure industries and make recommendations for training and retraining facilities in such jobs was commissioned by the LDDC from Pannell Kerr Forster and was expected to be ready by the end of February 1988 (*City Post*, 7 January 1988).

Employers' requirements

The current lack of close agreement among different commentators and interested parties about either present or future job markets, as far as they affect local people, has been alluded to. Moreover, future staffing and skills requirements – except in the short term – of individual employers are often not wholly clear, even within organisations (Ashton and Maguire, undated). Information from employers about specific skills requirements for current jobs may also be sparse, as Wellington (1987) suggests: '. . . *the needs of employers are not framed in terms of skills required . . . their requirements are always stated in the language of attitudes and dispositions.*' This was generally borne out during the evaluation by interviews with careers officers and with the manager of an employment agency. This tendency must have a bearing not only on the predictability of general job-market trends but, more seriously, on the accuracy with which training needs can be forecast.

However, a general picture is available of what existing employers are looking for in recruiting employees. The chairman of IBM has maintained (Nixon, 1986) that industry has three broad requirements from its young employees: that they should have a wide base of general knowledge, that they must have '*flexible minds*' to respond to the changes technology will bring, and that a good proportion of them must be among '*the most able*'.

There seems to be fairly broad agreement, at least at senior levels, that employers are looking for '*initiative, responsibility and adaptability*' in the people they employ (Confederation of British Industry quoted in Turner, 1987). Employees should have '*particular skills to do particular jobs, or evidence of the potential to acquire such skills*'; they should be able to '*cope with, adapt to and manage change*' and be '*competent and confident learners . . . and self-reliant*' (Institute of Personnel Managers quoted in Turner, 1987). Sample interviews were conducted with employers who recruited SKILLNET trainees through the placement service operated by the SKILLNET counsellors, and these are reported on in Chapter 7. Their views, on the whole, were of the same general tenor; though, additionally, the fast-changing environment meant that they tended to be looking for people who could '*pick up the job and run with it*'.

Employers' organisations also stress that '*people will have to train and retrain for a series of progressive and/or alternative occupations throughout their working lives.*' This means that '*the concept of education and training that is "started and finished" at the beginning of one's working life*' is no longer appropriate, (Turner, 1987).

It is not yet clear in broad terms how this requirement for further or ongoing training is to be met and how it might be integrated into an employee's working life. Only a quarter of firms on the Isle of Dogs, for example, were providing any in-service training, whether in-house, day-release, external courses or apprenticeships (Tym and Partners, 1987). Over two-fifths of this training was aimed at young people, which is consonant with findings in other reports that British training is 'front-end loaded' – that is to say, that the major portion of training takes place in the immediate post-school years (Ashton and Maguire, undated; McRae, 1987).

However, although precise information about recruitment and training trends in the dockland area (as anywhere else) may be hard to acquire, an overall occupational requirement can be identified. There is a rapidly growing need for potential employees – particularly those in the burgeoning office and finance sectors, but increasingly in all sectors and at most levels – to have some familiarity with the 'new' technology (the

information and communications systems based on microchip technology). The skills associated with these systems are usually referred to as 'computer literacy', 'keyboard skills' and so forth, and have come to occupy a central position in skills training generally. (See Chapter 6 for discussion of 'transferable skills' and Chapter 7 for discussion of 'computer literacy'.)

An indication of concern about the lack of co-ordinated evidence on employment needs may be found in an initiative based on collaboration between the Department of Employment/MSC and the LDDC. A project has been set up – the London Docklands Liaison Group – which will aim to co-ordinate the gathering of intelligence both about the changing dockland labour markets and about training initiatives and developments, in order to link jobs, training and local needs more effectively. Analysis of needs and recommendations for action were contained in the document *DE/MSC London Docklands Liaison Group*, 1987. The Liaison Group started functioning soon afterwards with the general remit of co-ordinating Department of Employment activity in Docklands, gathering labour market intelligence, upskilling and retraining the work-force and devising strategies to get unemployed people back to work.

ASSESSMENT OF TRAINEES' NEEDS

Identification of 'need'

What constitutes individuals' needs is a somewhat contentious area, because – in the view of commentators like Kushner (1985) or Grosch (1987) – 'needs' in the context of training are customarily defined in terms of 'skills' which people supposedly lack, which in turn are those which employers, industrialists and politicians claim to be necessary for creating a healthy economy. The distinction between what industry needs and what individuals need (or want) clearly ought not to be blurred, although the issues are complex. Further discussion of this in relation to SKILLNET trainees arises in Chapter 4.

However, the educational characteristics of the population are probably one reliable guide to people's expectations and opportunities, on which a hypothesis of 'need' might be built. The following statistics suggest long-term educational disadvantage in the dockland areas from which SKILLNET draws its trainees.

Educational characteristics and their significance

Figures in the ILEA report for 1986–7 show that fewer pupils in the dockland area stayed on after the age of 16 than in any other ILEA area. Just under a quarter of 16-year-olds in Tower Hamlets (Division 5) and just under a fifth in Southwark (Division 8) remained at school beyond the statutory leaving age as compared with nearly half of 16-year-olds in the highest division (Camden and City of Westminster). The national figure is nearly 30 per cent (*Statistics of Education*, DES, 1986). Destination statistics produced for 1986–7 by the ILEA Careers Service in Division 5 (Tower Hamlets) take these figues further: while just under a quarter of fifth-formers stayed on at school, nearly a third went into employment. More school-leavers remained unemployed than went into further education (10 per cent of the total as compared with 8 per cent).

As far as those unemployed young adults are concerned, a question which arises from these figures – bare as they are – is (as more than one interviewee put it) whether short training courses such as those run by the SKILLNET programme can by themselves redress ten years of 'failure' in compulsory education which has been reinforced by the experience of unemployment.

Figures for examination results are not broken down by division, but about a fifth of all ILEA pupils did not sit either O level or Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE) examinations in the years 1980-5. This compares with a national figure of around 14 per cent. Just over 60 per cent of ILEA pupils did not gain any O levels in the first three grades or any CSE grade ones, compared with around 34 per cent nationally (*Annual Abstract of Statistics*, HMSO, 1988). Clearly, educational results are influenced by a range of factors, among the most prominent of which is social class (see later).

The social survey of the Isle of Dogs (Wallman et al., 1987) tends to bear out some of the above figures. It found that 42 per cent of people aged 16–65 had no formal qualifications. Self-employed people were the most highly qualified, followed by those in full-time employment, while over two-thirds of unemployed people had no formal qualifications. However, since this might give a restricted indication of the community's skills resources, practical skills were also considered. The range of such skills was broad and included driving, building and decorating, clerical, catering, arts and crafts and foreign languages.

Most people appeared not to be involved in any training or retraining; of those few taking training courses, the 16–25 age group accounted for the most in terms of age group, and full-time workers in terms of employment status. Only 5 per cent of unemployed people (whether registered or not) were taking any training.

However, to set these statistics in their social context, several commentators draw attention to the importance of not assuming that low formal educational achievement indicates a lack, for either individual or community, of *'alternative positive resources'* which *'can be put to gainful practical use'*. Amongst unemployed people on the Isle of Dogs, over half said they had practical skills of one kind or another, which *'demonstrates a significant resource potential for future employment and counteracts the image of unskilled and unmotivated local people unwilling or unable to become involved in productive activity'*. (Wallman et al., 1987.)

> *'. . . our experience is that this generation and all generations of people from the East End are amazingly bright. They come from a long tradition of living on their wits. Yet these young people now appear unsuitable for jobs that anyone with a basic education can get . . . It seems that the only thing . . . missing is confidence.'* (Roberts, 1987.)

Factors influencing educational achievement

Of the major factors influencing educational achievement, one is socio-economic class and another is school-leaving age. There is, moreover, a crucial link between these factors. Stated briefly, it is that *'the longer a working class pupil survives within the school system the more closely do his chances of surviving . . . approximate to the service and intermediate class pupils' chances.'* (Halsey et al., 1980). However, these are the very people who can least afford, financially speaking, to make that decision. There is much talk of needing to change young people's aspirations and attitudes, but it is arguable that such changes are more likely to occur if the material disincentives are removed. The Youth Cohort Study (Courtenay, 1986) indicated that the financial sacrifice entailed was a disincentive to further education; the expected rate of return from education had to be much higher to encourage working-class pupils to stay on at school.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE *SKILLNET* QSI PROGRAMME

The paper designating the role and mechanisms for the Docklands Open College (Kennard, 1985) was clear about the meaning and causes of the current problem: *'The most significant deficiencies within the area of East London are patently manifest and lie in the vocational preparation and participation rates in post-school training.'* This has led to *'an inverse ratio between the diminishing skill acquisition among the local population and the rapid technological advances in production and distribution methods generally.'* Contributory factors were public-sector provision on the one hand – being, in Kennard's words, *'inflexible, rigidly structured . . . and geared to accredited and qualification-achieving courses'* – and the *'apathy'* and *'negative attitudes'* of young people on the other. It is these factors which Kennard held responsible for local people's *'increasing difficulty in finding and sustaining employment.'* Such views would appear to have much in common with a 'skills mismatch' analysis and approach.

However, as has been shown above, there are complexities and dilemmas within such a concept. First, there are problems in identifying the skills purported to be lacking. This is partly due to uncertainties on the demand side (employer forecasting is insufficiently precise or accessible) but has also to do with the fact, on the supply side, that while people may lack qualifications, they do not necessarily lack skills. Secondly, however, there is evidence to point to the correlation of prior educational attainment with opportunities for exposure to skills acquisition: those most highly qualified are those most likely to get further training. Thirdly, it is unclear to what extent unemployment generally is amenable to individual as distinct from structural solutions. Fourthly, the locality in question is a working-class area where present and future employment patterns require skills and qualifications more usually associated with middle-class occupations but where 'pay-offs' from further education have not traditionally been seen as comparable with those from employment, where a choice between them has to be made.

It has been shown in Chapter 2 how proposals for the Docklands Open College were revised in terms of scale, mechanisms of provision and project 'ownership' to become Docklands SKILLNET. What is not clear is how far Kennard's analysis and hence the general nature of his solutions were equally rigorously revalued. There appears, for instance, to be little written discussion at a policy-making level within SKILLNET which either advances or refutes Kennard's original thesis, though there are certainly dissenting or at least qualifying views on 'skills mismatch' and its solutions held by SKILLNET staff which have been presented both orally and in written form. During the course of interview, opinions of staff in providing institutions about causes and remedies could also be gleaned: a wide range of views appeared to be emerging. (Variations of approach are explored in Chapter 4.) There is not, probably, a close consensus of analysis on which SKILLNET operations are automatically based. However, it is perhaps precisely because the angles of vision under the SKILLNET umbrella are so numerous and so different that it would not be easy, let alone expedient, for the central administration to undertake the task of theoretical unification.

Indeed, SKILLNET was set up pricisely to undertake a matching job. Employers want – and appear unable to get – skilled workers in particular fields; and some of the local population want – and appear unable to get – the jobs they want. It would seem to be of the utmost importance, then, for everyone concerned that redevelopment can be made to benefit, and be seen to benefit, the local populations; skills training seemed to provide an answer. However, the four major reservations about 'skills mismatch' outlined above suggest possible areas of vulnerability for the SKILLNET programme, given SKILLNET's aims and the expectations that have surrounded it. The evidence in this chapter raises the questions: to what extent could training of the sort provided by the SKILLNET QSI programme – that is, short courses in specific occupational areas, containing a component of independent learning and provided at a number of public- and private-sector establishments in the locality (more fully described in the next chapter) – improve the employment opportunities of trainees, and to what extent could it simultaneously offer employers what they needed?

4

PROVISION AND PROVIDERS

INTRODUCTION

As has been described in Chapter 2, Docklands SKILLNET was set up as a network to facilitate provision of training to unemployed local people. When the grant from the European Social Fund (ESF) became available, public-sector providers in ILEA and the London Borough of Newham (LBN) were asked to design short courses which would comply with ESF elgibility criteria (see Chapter 2, 'Initial organisation, administration and funding arrangements of Docklands SKILLNET'). Phase 1 of this Quick Start Initiative (QSI) programme, as it was known, started in the autumn of 1986; Phases 2 and 3 followed in the new year and Easter 1987 respectively. Phase 4 was established in autumn 1987. Visits were made by the researcher to a cross-section of courses on Phases 3 and 4, which were being run during the time of the evaluation. Interviews with staff were conducted in which comment was elicited on – amongst other things – the operation of SKILLNET QSI in its different phases, as it was already known that modifications had been made since its inception.

The present chapter accordingly gives a general picture of how the SKILLNET course programme was developed through this organisational network. It looks at the structures and mechanisms of provision – the participating institutions and the courses (next section) – then identifies and comments on the major issues arising from them. Issues arising from the institutions as providers – SKILLNET in different habitats – are examined (third section); likewise issues arising from course content, teaching methods and aspects of trainee support (fourth section). Influences on, and characteristics of, the SKILLNET administration itself are discussed in the fifth section. Taking forward the discusssion in Chapter 3, issues arising from SKILLNET QSI's attempts to meet employers' requirements on the one hand and trainees' needs on the other are then highlighted (sixth section). Within the whole of this discussion, experiences and views of staff in institutions and in the SKILLNET administration are recorded.

STRUCTURES AND MECHANISMS OF SUPPLY: Participating institutions and courses

Types of providing institution

The pattern of participating institutions has been broadly the same throughout the QSI programme (Table 4.1). The majority of providers are colleges of further and/or higher education or adult education establishments within the public sector (maintained by either ILEA or LBN). Other providers have been polytechnics, university colleges and independently maintained agencies. Of the last-mentioned, most were funded or part-funded by the MSC, with additional support from sources such as central government grants or the ESF; in one case, funding comes from the post-GLC London Residuary Body and from two borough councils. Some establishments have participated continuously in SKILLNET QSI from the beginning; others have dropped out, or come in, at later stages. Some larger colleges, such as Hackney and Newham Community College, have offered a range of different courses in the same phase. The proportion of independent providers, such as local technology training centres, has increased over time. These training agencies, though distinct from each other in aims and remit, have different priorities and practices as a group from those of the further education (FE) sector. These differences are explored in the next section on 'Issues of Supply: the institutions as providers'.

TABLE **4.1** ***Participating Institutions***

Phase	LEA	Polytechnic/ University	Independent	Total
1	(7) **7**	(1) –	(1) **1**	**8**
2	(7) **6**	–	(1) **1**	**7**
3	(4) **4**	(2) **1**	(4) **4**	**9**
4	(9) **6**	(3) **1**	(5) **5**	**12**

Figures in parentheses show establishments where courses were offered.
Bold figures show those where courses took place.

Types of course

Courses were offered in the occupational areas shown in Table 4.2; most of these areas were represented in each phase. The numbers of courses offered and run in the various types of participating institution are indicated in Table 4.3.

TABLE **4.2** ***Types of courses offered/run***

Type of course	Phase 1[a]	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4
Basic and foundation skills	1	–	(1) **1**	(1) **1**
Electronics	9	(6) **6**	(5) **3**	(14) **8**
Computing	8	(5) **5**	(5) **5**	(12) **9**
Secretarial and office skills	5	(6) **4**	(8) **7**	(18) **12**
Business and banking	4	(3) **1**	–	(4) **2**
Construction	7	(1) **1**	(1) **1**	–
Transport (including driving[b])	4	(1) **1**	–	(3) **2**
Manufacture/Engineering	2	(1) **1**	(1) –	(5) **1**
Catering	1	(1) **1**	(1) **1**	(1) –

Figures in parentheses show numbers of courses offered; bold figures show numbers of courses which took place.
[a] The numbers for Phase 1 are incomplete.
[b] Although this was a popular type of course in Phase 1, it was ineligible for ESF funding and consequently dropped from later phases.

Half the courses on Phase 1 were electronics, computing or office courses; in subsequent phases the proportion rose to three-quarters. This emphasis reflects the ESF specification that courses contain an element of 'new' technology.

TABLE **4.3** ***Numbers of courses offered/run***

Phase	LEAs	Polytechnic/ University	Independent	Total
1[a]	(41) **37**	(1) –	(1) **1**	(43) **38**
2	(22) **18**	–	(2) **2**	(24) **20**
3	(14) **11**	(2) **1**	(6) **6**	(22) **18**
4	(44) **25**	(2) **1**	(12) **9**	(58) **35**

Figures in parentheses show numbers of courses offered; bold figures show numbers of courses which took place.
[a] Because different figures for Phase 1 are given in different documents, these statistics may not be accurate.

Some comment may be required on the difference between the numbers of courses offered and the numbers run. Phase 1 is generally agreed to have been implemented with insufficient time for planning (see Chapter 2). However, continuing exigencies of time-scale made it always difficult to incorporate the lessons from previous phases into the current and proximate ones: the next round of courses required to be planned before the previous phase was finished and properly evaluated. Course length (200 hours) and the notification procedure for the ESF grant – in arrears (see Chapter 2) – were factors in the problem of timing. A more general area of uncertainty is that while it is possible, in broad terms, to ascertain the types of courses which will be broadly relevant to employers' needs, it is not quite so obvious how to anticipate what will attract trainees and to find reliable ways of recruiting and enrolling them. Only 60 per cent of the courses approved and offered for Phase 4 attracted sufficient initial enrolments for courses to be run. This is reported to be because the start of Phase 4 seems to have coincided with increased availability of local jobs and increased local training provision. One could infer that some intractable difficulty in basic forecasting has been continually encountered by SKILLNET QSI.

There was a variety of arrangements for trainees who enrolled for courses which were subsequently not run. In some cases, the institution 'infilled' them on one of its existing courses; in others, SKILLNET staff directed them to a similar SKILLNET course elsewhere or kept a record of their name and address so as to invite them back to a subsequent SKILLNET course.

Course arrangements

Although a minimum course length of 200 hours (100 hours class contact and 100 hours independent learning) was specified by the ESF criteria, different establishments structured their courses in different ways, according to their institutional timetabling and staffing patterns. Broadly speaking, though there are exceptions, independent training agencies tended to offer a course in a block, where sessions were held morning or afternoon most days of the week for a period of 8–12 weeks. Colleges, however, were rather more likely to offer courses on one or two days a week over a longer period.

Differences in the interpretation of 'independent learning' also seem to have made a difference to course length. Some establishments – again, the training agencies were rather more likely to do this than the FE sector – would appear to have incorporated independent learning into the course timetable. Others timetabled class contact hours only, perhaps with an additional optional session once a week to allow access to computers or word-processors. Differences in the interpretation and implementation of independent learning are discussed in the section on 'Issues of supply: course content, teaching methods and trainee support'.

From Phase 2 onwards, SKILLNET educational and counselling staff attempted to provide a full range of support for the administration of the QSI programme in the sense that recruitment for courses, liaison with course tutors or managers on curricula, learning materials, budgets and so forth, quality control of courses, follow-up and support of trainees on courses, as well as 'after-care' work and placement into employment all fell at some time within their work-load. These various accretions to their roles occurred on an *ad hoc* basis as SKILLNET developed.

In accordance with the ESF criteria, courses were offered to unemployed people aged under 25 who lived in the area affected by redevelopment (but see Appendix [G] for a discussion of different interpretations of that area). An exception was made in the case of courses in technology for women: funding was made available from a separate ESF bid for providing training for women over 25.

Attendance

Enrolment numbers (the people who turned up for the beginning of a course) were smaller than the recruitment figures (those who had previously said they would join a course); there was also quite a high drop-out in attendance rate from courses on each phase. There is more than one source for attendance figures (written and verbal reports as well as the SKILLNET data base), which were not always consistent. From Phase 2 onwards, course tutors were asked to submit records of attendance because it was on the basis of this information that course attendance allowances were paid to trainees; the drop-out rate was also supposed to be monitored on the basis of this information. These returns were in theory submitted to the SKILLNET office at monthly intervals on Phases 2 and 3, and weekly on Phase 4, though returns for some courses came at decidely less regular intervals. Table 4.4 gives broadly comparable figures for Phases 2,3 and 4 (Phase 1 figures are approximate), and suggests that, in terms of drop-out, SKILLNET was more effective when managing a relatively modest programme. (More staff were recruited in 1988 with the aim of achieving better quality control for the projected programme.)

In Phase 1, some students were 'adopted' as SKILLNET trainees if their courses conformed to general SKILLNET criteria (see Bann, 1987b). A few respondents to the postal questionnaire and follow-up interviews said they had never heard of SKILLNET; or that the only connection they had had with SKILLNET was when they received a cheque from the office (for the course attendance allowance). These people could be identified in the main as having started Business and Technician Education Council (BTEC) or electronics courses at a particular FE college in September 1986. This was not in accordance with the principle of 'complementarity' on which SKILLNET provision was intended to be based and the practice was dropped for subsequent phases.

TABLE **4.4** ***Drop-out from courses***

Phase	Offered	Attended 3+	Attended second half	Drop-out (%)
1	1,000	420	250	75
2	339	212	160	53
3	281	239	189	33
4	634	436	331	48

Numbers refer to places, not trainees.

Reasons for people dropping out of courses are discussed in the light of trainees' reported experiences in Chapter 5. Dissatisfaction with courses was certainly one factor, but personal and external circumstances are also implicated.

ISSUES OF SUPPLY: The institutions as providers

Institutions and the courses they run are in some ways impossible to comment on in isolation from each other – the types of courses, the way they are run (including such diverse elements as timetabling, staffing and 'pastoral' aspects), and their outcomes in terms of qualifications gained and prospects for moving on, all these are clearly dependent on the remit and characteristics of the institution providing them. However, since SKILLNET QSI courses were intended to have a common identity of some kind, this section, together with the next, attempt to bring out some of the ways in which institutional practices on the one hand and course type and content on the other have impinged on a SKILLNET identity.

Institutional remits and approaches

Different establishments had very different remits within a shared broad commitment to serve the 'local community'. Some, for example, were constituted to provide opportunities for particular target groups, such as ethnic minority populations; some were established to provide training in specific occupational areas. Urgent questions of funding supply were sometimes felt to dominate provision: more than one interviewee expressed the view that, in the current climate of increasing public-sector funding cuts, ensuring departments' (or colleges') continued viability tended to take priority over other considerations. In practice, this meant an emphasis on filling courses.

Institutional remit may have had an influence on institutional approach: for example, in those institutions which specifically (though not necessarily exclusively) catered for unemployed people, it was accepted that a great deal of tutorial resourcing was required; that an 'open-house' atmosphere worked best; that outreach and follow-up work should be built in to the programme; and that language support ought to be given. One training agency had speakers of Sylheti, Bengali, Somali, Chinese and Romanian languages available. On limited observation, it appeared that tutors in smaller establishments tended to have more individual contact with, and knowledge of, the trainees. There was no visible pecking order in these places, such as addressing the tutor as 'Sir', which, while it may not have been required, was not discouraged at some FE institutions. Some establishments were notable for their 'user-friendliness' on first impression, such as the helpfulness of reception personnel, the accessibility of information, the provision of small informal coffee-bar areas and the relaxed atmosphere in classes. Other establishments, particularly the larger ones, had contrasting characteristics which, again on first impression, could have been slightly off-putting, such as a conspicuous security-guard presence in the foyer, grilles over reception area windows and notices to students not to congregate.

Course planning

As has been described in Chapter 2, course proposals for the SKILLNET QSI programme were, in the first phase, undertaken in great haste. Establishments tended to offer courses which were already tried and tested. Nor was this problem completely overcome in later phases – partly because the SKILLNET timetable was insufficiently compatible with that of institutions which operated on an academic year (three terms punctuated by vacations), which led to persistent time pressures on course development. In one large establishment, an effect of such pressure (it was reported) had been to inhibit interdepartmental conferral on course proposals; duplication of course bids had therefore occurred.

One perceived effect of insufficient time for course development was that the extent of curricular innovation was not perhaps as great as had initially been hoped. Moreover, some interviewees expressed concern that there was sometimes a long delay before institutions received approval from SKILLNET for proposed courses. According to one interviewee, this particularly affected part-time tutors, whose contracts were on a termly basis; acceptance for courses had tended not to arrive in time for them to know whether they would definitely have work in a few weeks' time.

But time has played an important role in a more positive sense: tutors in institutions which have participated in SKILLNET for more than one phase of QSI have been able, on the basis of past experience, to adapt their courses, in style and content, to the needs of the trainees they found themselves teaching. This was perhaps particularly relevant to FE institutions where designing courses specifically for unemployed people in their twenties tended to be a new area of expertise.

Recruitment and induction

Recruitment practices for SKILLNET QSI courses varied. Recruitment for Phase 1 had to be achieved in some haste and special arrangements were made for an intensive recruitment period, with additional help drawn from the LEAs. Some tutors who had been involved in this early stage felt, on reflection, that SKILLNET publicity had been unhelpful, for trainees and institutions, by appearing to offer something that could not be delivered. Glossy publicity material showing well-equipped 'high-tech' buildings was distributed, whereas the majority of adult education institutes and even FE colleges were by no means so fortunate: one adult education establishment did not have a computer room at the time. Some bias was detectable in the material, it was suggested: photographs tended to show men engaged in activities more than women; no crèche provision was mentioned; and the material was in English only, whereas many of the potential trainee clientele had some language other than English as their mother tongue and/or were women, of whom a number had small children. A tutor who had been instrumental in introducing and sustaining SKILLNET QSI courses in one establishment from the beginning felt strongly that these factors, together with some poor administrative practices (documented in a report), were partly responsible for the high drop-out rate in Phase 1.

Some institutions planned and undertook publicity and recruiting for courses independently of SKILLNET in accordance with their customary practice – this applied particularly to training agencies. Adult education centres supplemented SKILLNET's publicity with publicity procedures and networks of their own. In some cases, when it became clear that the SKILLNET publicity had not pulled in sufficient recruits for a particular course, additional publicity was undertaken by course tutors. These different practices had implications for the 'identity' of courses as far as trainees were concerned. While independent recruitment tended to ensure that more places would be filled on those courses – contacts with potential clientele through community centres or personal networks were already established – it had the effect of making SKILLNET's role rather tenuous.

Recruitment of trainees through SKILLNET, on the other hand, gave rise to difficulty on occasions. SKILLNET had not always received from providers adequate information about courses which would enable appropriate counselling to take place. SKILLNET recruitment may also have raised questions about trainees' relationship to the institution.

Particularly in large FE colleges, doubt seems occasionally to have arisen about 'whose' trainees they were. One trainee reported during the course of interview that a lecturer had refused a group of SKILLNET trainees entry to his class in rather deprecating language. This allegation has been supported by other similar reports and indicates, at the very least, that there was an uncertainty about the status of SKILLNET trainees, which seems to have arisen through lack of communication within the particular college department. The effect on trainees of this kind of experience may, of course, be damaging.

Other considerations were brought to light during discussions of recruitment which made it clear that this was a more complex matter than simply publicising and filling places on courses. A manager of an independent agency, which in her words was '*committed to providing a quality service to the community*', was of the opinion that the recruitment process ought to include pre-course counselling and induction: '*for people with a history of unemployment, the lengthy process beforehand is what makes the course appropriate.*' The person might find that another option altogether was better. In this agency, counselling was given to all individuals applying for a course whether or not they chose in the end to take a course there. Another agency was also keen to base its SKILLNET programme on an institutional pattern developed through a six-month outreach project in the local community: the first week of a course was normally given over to formulating a personal 'learning contract' with trainees in order to mitigate previous learning difficulties and negative experiences.

The induction process was in both these instances regarded as providing a valuable diagnostic tool for both providers and trainees; and could offer an alternative mode of selecting trainees where this was necessary (see later section on 'Issues of demand: employers' requirements and trainees' needs'). Indeed, SKILLNET courses usually involved some induction, but this seems in the majority of cases to have consisted of a one-day introductory session, the purpose of which was not always clear: not all trainees who enrolled for a course or who subsequently attended had been present at the induction. It might therefore be argued that principles underlying different recruitment practices reflect differences in institutions' general approach to SKILLNET QSI courses; and also that these principles have affected the subsequent operation of courses.

Tutorial support

Again, principles and practice varied considerably according to the type of institution. The training agencies with a 'community' brief placed a high priority on continuous tutorial support for individual trainees. Staffing and timetabling arrangements therefore existed to support this objective. At the other extreme, there were a very few instances of minimal institutional support, notably in the further and/or higher education (FHE) sector. In one case, probing of what support was offered to trainees resulted in the reply that students were expected to be self-motivated but that they could come and discuss problems at any time. In another example, the tutor maintained that no special support was needed beyond insisting that trainees acquire habits with which they might have grown unfamilar, such as punctuality and self-discipline. It should be noted that though these were quite untypical cases, they illustrate the potential gap between an acceptable course proposal on the one hand and actual provision on the other.

Provision of counselling or guidance for trainees was often perceived as the responsibility of the SKILLNET counselling team. This form of provision was often equally problematic, again for the reason of inadequate resources. This touches on one of the major issues associated with training courses for unemployed people generally: whether it is sufficient to plan and fund them as if the vocational elements constituted

the main or the only need. So, for instance, a difficulty noted by one agency manager arose from the criteria for course funding, which made no allowance for what he termed the 'personal development' aspects of training. These were rated as of major importance especially for people with a history of learning difficulties and/or of unemployment; who might additionally lack fluency in English, or be single parents or have other personal circumstances which indicated a need for continuous support in undertaking a course. Another training agency which undertook substantial recruitment and induction work, on-course counselling, post-course guidance (in the form of drop-in sessions) and job-search assistance was consistently, according to its manager, the base to which trainees and ex-trainees referred. SKILLNET was said to have a low profile in the operation of the courses run here. In both these cases, the extensive tutorial support which was felt for similar reasons to be necessary for trainees, and the co-ordination required to provide it, were thought to be inadequately allowed for by SKILLNET accountancy procedures. Managers of both agencies expressed this in terms of 'subsidising' SKILLNET courses from the agencies' budgets. Resources available from the ESF were sufficient, according to a SKILLNET officer, to support the costs of counselling, but the way in which they were passed on by SKILLNET did not ensure that adequate tutorial support for trainees was actually provided. Funding arrangements for the 1988 programme would pass on both the responsibility and the resources for recruitment, counselling and support to the providing institutions.

However, where the counselling element had been undertaken by SKILLNET, the staff reported that they had encountered the same problems as with post-course guidance and placement (see later section on 'Issues of demand'). There would have been too much work for the number of staff hours allocated had all trainees been actively encouraged to engage in individual advice sessions. Counsellors did provide help for trainees who approached them, and this provision attracted a great deal of positive comment from those trainees (see also Chapter 5).

Other support

'*The biggest problem for women is child care*', according to several tutors. Local authority or community schemes do not operate on a year-round basis which (according to the deputy manager of a training agency) '*leaves women with nowhere to go*'. They may well drop out of courses because of the problems of finding somewhere suitable for their children to be left. Good child care is another resource-intensive commitment; publicly funded schemes may be the only solution for some parents because registered child-minders are likely to cost far more than an unemployed trainee can afford. As the problem emerged in SKILLNET's early stages, different arrangements were funded on an *ad hoc* basis. Some of these arrangements proved very expensive, however, and there was a fear of setting a precedent that could not be maintained if the demand grew larger. SKILLNET continued to give funding to child-care schemes in establishments where these already existed.

However, the problem was far from being solved. On one visit, it was noted that children were in the agency's administrative office, being looked after informally by office staff. It is not only women who are affected, of course, but women (both staff and trainees) were, on the whole, the ones to mention the issue. Women tutors seemed, unsurprisingly, not only to understand the difficulties faced by women trainees but to want to give them every credit for their commitment to their courses in the face of complicated child-care arrangements. It was in this context that the notion of trainees' 'apathy' was most vociferously rejected. SKILLNET counsellors have also expressed views about this, to the effect that if SKILLNET were to take up the issue of child-care as a principle, its credibility would be greatly increased. Although no resources had so far

been sought or allocated for child-care provision, one counsellor believed it would be a major innovation if SKILLNET were able to enhance child-care provision for centres of education and training in the Docklands. (The issue is further discussed in the light of trainees' experiences in Chapter 5.)

Views on drop-out

Provision for unemployed people was conceived quite differently in different institutions: in many of those not set up to cater specifically for the unemployed, tutors confessed to a lack of knowledge about what special measures might work to encourage people to attend courses and expressed puzzlement about why they dropped out. The drop-out rate has decreased, but not dramatically, since Phase 2, and has been the cause of much discussion. In many cases, tutors were themselves baffled as to the causes. Sometimes trainees were away for specific reasons and took care to notify this. Mostly, though, people simply failed to turn up, and after a couple of weeks tutors assumed that they would not return. A tutor in an FE college whose trainees were not turning up regularly reported the same thing in another course he was running for unemployed people, whereas students on his evening-class course who were employees in a large firm attended regularly and punctually. Another course tutor in the same college observed that he was more used to dealing with day-release students and thought that unemployed people had different problems. Several tutors were of the opinion that *'time has no meaning for the unemployed'* and that this could be the cause of unpunctuality and poor attendance. While there is evident concern, both for the problem of drop-out and for the difficulties unemployed people may face, it has to be said that views on the matter were sometimes vague and unsubstantiated given that SKILLNET QSI provision was intended specifically for unemployed people. 'Unemployment' seemed occasionally to have acquired an aetiological status in itself. But while unemployment has deleterious effects on people's morale (which have been documented), it is not self-evident that this leads inexorably to apathy and disaffection. Indeed, it may be, as one tutor in an agency remarked, that *'apathy is a sign of the failure of institutions, not of the trainees'*.

Furthermore, although the drop-out rate may not give room for complacency, it is not clear precisely what significance should be attached to it. As is clear from the trainees' own evidence in Chapter 5, there was a variety of reasons for people leaving their courses without completing them. Getting a job, deciding to take a different course, moving away from the area, experiencing difficulties at home, were common enough reasons in addition to any expressed dissatisfaction with the courses. It may be that part-time short courses, especially if they are perceived as 'taster' courses, evoke a lower degree of commitment than full-length, full-time ones and that mobility will therefore *ceteris paribus* be higher. However, the only way to obtain information that can be fed back into the management of courses is by systematic monitoring and follow-up; and here there was some confusion over whose responsibility this was. Some tutors telephoned or wrote to people who had not turned up for two or three weeks, while others maintained that this was SKILLNET's role.

The overall conclusion to be drawn from evidence in this section is that trainees may have had very different experiences of SKILLNET courses depending on institutional characteristics, particularly the commitment of an institution to trainees as individuals.

ISSUES OF SUPPLY: Course content, teaching methods and trainee support

Some general features of provision within the SKILLNET QSI programme are examined in this section. Comparisons between courses of a similar type in different institutions or on different phases, or between SKILLNET courses and similar courses elsewhere, are not undertaken since they are more properly the subject of an ongoing quality-control exercise.

Provision of basic education and foundation courses

Some tutors (and employers) who were interviewed stressed the desirability of more basic and foundation courses, or for courses which incorporated basic general skills, technical and social. A foundation course which had been offered in the same establishment – a community-based adult education centre – seems to have been one of the most successful courses (at least as measured by continued attendance by trainees). A short report by the tutor noted that *'the problem with a foundation studies "package" is that it assumes all students have the same range of needs. This is patently untrue . . . Therefore we have adopted a flexible approach.'* Alongside the SKILLNET courses in English, maths and computing, eight other institute-funded basic education courses were run. Through individual counselling, the needs of SKILLNET trainees were diagnosed; they could thereafter attend sessions of those other courses appropriate to their needs. (The same facility was extended to non-SKILLNET students on the basic education courses.) This 'integrated approach', according to the report, made continuing course development possible, and in a way which closely matched changing student needs.

It is important to note, however, that the ESF criteria allowed for vocational training only; this problem seems to have been negotiated by ensuring that the foundation course integrated components of computing and word-processing. While 'training' and 'education' are not mutually exclusive concepts in theory or practice, there are questions here about the relative emphases which can or should be placed on trainees' different needs within the scope of a short course. A manager of a training agency noted that provision of purely vocational short courses would exclude large numbers of the community who needed, in addition to foundation courses, ongoing English, maths and 'personal development' tutoring. On the other hand, a problem might equally be perceived with vocational provision. One tutor remarked that, as regards job-specific training which might directly increase employability, provision from the FHE sector was not suitable because of its overriding commitment to education.

Provision of 'second-stage' courses

At the other extreme from basic education, high-tech courses such as 'computer-aided engineering' seemed to be popular with the trainees who chose them. (There was, so far as could be ascertained, a fairly low drop-out rate on such a course offered in Phase 4.) However, it is arguable that these courses would not be suitable for people with no qualifications. In the college where this course was being offered, progression from a basic computer-aided design/manufacturing (CAD/CAM) course through a series of linked courses in robot technology, computer-aided draughting and numerically controlled/computer numerically controlled (NC/CNC) machining was planned, in line with the college's usual practice. Two

questions were thereby raised: Would pre-selection of trainees for such courses be necessary and what implications might this have for the SKILLNET 'open-door' policy? How might progression through the courses, leading to a City and Guilds qualification, be ensured when it has been the practice to offer a different 'à la carte' menu of courses on each phase? Thus SKILLNET advertising – based on information given to administrative staff – had not originally indicated that the CAD/CAM courses were sequential. It seems that college tutors revised their expectations of trainees' capabilities in the light of experience and the detailed course descriptions handed out to trainees specified pre-conditions. This area needed clarification in theory and practice.

The role of short courses

The brevity of SKILLNET courses was thought by several tutors to be an attractive feature – not so daunting as a full-time, full-length course. The major reported difficulty was that such courses, taken singly, may not provide much more than a 'taster'; trainees often could not even attempt to gain the desired qualification. Short courses are probably better thought of as 'modules', which was the term often preferred by course organisers. The term 'module' usually means one of a series of discrete units embodying the possibility of credit accumulation. But it seems that not many trainees were enabled, or wished, to use SKILLNET in that way. By far the majority of trainees on Phases 1 – 4 had taken one course only. Some colleges, however, were arranging their SKILLNET courses to form a progression from one phase to the next, sometimes on a roll-on roll-off basis according to trainees' need. This required institutional flexibility and was therefore perhaps more readily implemented in the independent agencies where, at one establishment, new courses were being planned on the basis of dividing existing ones into two parts of 15 weeks each to run on from each other. Staff in one or two FE colleges, however, had also instituted a roll-on roll-off system quite early on as a way of accommodating the evident needs of trainees.

A community training agency liked to make a distinction between short courses and access courses: SKILLNET's practice of short courses, according to the manager, did not necessarily give trainees an end in view, there was no proper progression and the 'skills ladder' was '*more like a game of snakes and ladders*'. In contrast, access courses provided an entry point into a potential series of linked courses. 'Exit points' also needed to be defined: this was one aspect of helping individuals to set goals.

Specifically on the question of courses in computing, one tutor said that short courses in general 'computer literacy' were not adequate to enhance employability: firms would employ personnel on the basis of expected performance in specific job areas. He thought that short courses could, however, enhance operational (as distinct from programming) skills, such as data retrieval and generation.

An innovative collaboration between course tutors, SKILLNET staff and local employers had resulted in a core-skills proposal for SKILLNET electronics courses (see Appendix [F]). This was felt by several interviewees to be an important contribution to the development of the SKILLNET programme, firstly because of the content, which would ensure a common course of training with a common assessment procedure for all electronics trainees. Secondly, the proposal was the result of the collaborative efforts of disparate groups of people, which provided a valuable model. Similar work was being undertaken in foundation studies and business studies.

Open learning

The field of open and distance learning is still a developing one. SKILLNET courses were to some extent inevitably involved in the piloting of various packages and different approaches, which in turn depended to some degree upon the experience and preferences of staff in providing institutions. Some tutors had extensive experience of existing 'learning packages' and were modifying these to make them more effective in particular circumstances. One manager has found that most self-paced packages assumed prior knowledge or prior experience of independent learning and tended to be racially or sexually stereotyped. Because the main trainee clientele for the agency was the local ethnic minority population, material of a combined multi-cultural and anti-racist design was being developed which, because it was unit-based, could be started at a variety of levels of difficulty.

The open learning component had arised primarily as a condition imposed on SKILLNET courses by the ESF criteria more than as a component arising integrally from course design, and interviewees expressed a range of reactions. Opinions about the effectiveness of open learning varied from *'well, they* [the trainees] *don't do it, do they?'* to *'open learning makes the college more available to the local community – we have a strong commitment to it.'* A principle of one establishment saw far-reaching advantages to open learning in steering education to be more student-centred and in assisting people to become 'autonomous learners' as distinct from being overdependent on educational providers.

In practice, most SKILLNET courses integrated most of the open learning into the timetable (partly because of pressure on rooms and resources, which could not be made available on an 'open-house' arrangement) and therewith provided some form of tutorial support. Occasionally some of the open learning component was more closely defined as distance learning and trainees were expected to work at home, though it was admitted that this was irregularly done. It was remarked that since much of the course content was practical, assignments had in any case usually to be done in a workshop situation, where equipment was available and health and safety regulations could be in force. Some tutors interpreted open learning as distance learning and called it 'homework'; it tended, in this case, to consist of reading and theory exercises. In only two cases noted did the distance learning comprise practical work on borrowable equipment; this was no doubt because of the problems of ensuring equipment could be returned when trainees left the course. Some tutors reported that though they had begun by loaning packages and equipment, the drop-out rate had inhibited them from continuing the practice. It might have been helpful to have explained this to trainees who wanted to work at home and were puzzled or annoyed by the prohibition on taking material home.

Several interviewees drew attention to the demands made by open learning on the trainee and the dangers of assuming either that trainees would find it an easy way of learning or that it was a less resource-intensive way of teaching. A SKILLNET counsellor pointed out that both the content and the process of the work were likely to be new; tutorial help was more likely to be given with the former than the latter. Most people would need support, even those who were well motivated from the start. The implications for providers, trainees and SKILLNET had not, the interviewee believed, been thought through from the beginning; support for open learning had to be provided by institutions. This view was supported by an agency manager, who said that some trainees, particularly perhaps older women returning to study, were quite unfamilar with open or independent learning and the explorative

element in course-work was hard for them to adjust to. Consequently, enabling independent learning to happen was a resource-intensive activity – it was not a question of giving out books or letting people have access to a computer. Independent learning had to be set up, supervised, administered and staffed. If this was not recognised in SKILLNET's accounting system, there was a danger of SKILLNET under funding its courses. Some review of the comparative effectiveness of open learning course materials and approaches used on different SKILLNET courses would seem to be indicated.

Accreditation for, and progression through, short courses with a component of open learning raises issues which are discussed in a separate chapter (Chapter 6).

Job-search component

Curriculum vitae (CV) preparation, interview techniques and practical aspects of job-hunting were built into several courses, usually towards the end and often under a title such as 'World of Work'. This appears to have been done partly in recognition that trainees wanted, on the whole, to find paid work on completing the course but might need more information about ways of optimising their chances. Partly, however, the integration of these elements into course-work might be seen as a substitute for other provision, such as systematic post-course guidance (see section on 'Issues of demand'). Again, this would have related to the question of resourcing.

On-course job-search activities were not as popular with trainees as advice and guidance given as part of the trainee's actual job-hunting. Tutors reported a marked reluctance on the part of trainees to attend these sessions or to undertake job-search activites, even when reimbursement of fares to employment agencies in the area was offered. '*They want to get the exam first, then worry about jobs and all the rest of it afterwards*', was the opinion of one tutor. At least one college offered, like some of the agencies, a post-course advice service. This was highly labour-intensive: as one counsellor put it, '*It's like being a parent*,' and most colleges did not have the resources for providing such a facility. Many trainees took advantage of the SKILLNET service: they could visit the SKILLNET office for advice on particular vacancies and be given practical assistance with the preparation of CVs, interview techniques and general advice about the job market. This responsibility fell naturally to the SKILLNET counsellors as secondees from, or as previous employees of, ILEA Careers Service, as well as from the fact that they had often had, through course visits, previous contact with those individuals. However, the scale of the need and the amount of co-ordination and administration it would optimally require were not thoroughly investigated as part of the design of SKILLNET but discovered as the programme evolved. The service seems to have worked effectively for people who were able to make a link with the SKILLNET counsellors, particularly since SKILLNET had been developing its employer links. But it has raised intractable problems of resourcing this facility on the one hand (see section on 'Issues of demand') and, on the other, it underlined both the need for and the difficulty of maintaining contact with individual trainees who have left courses or whose main link was with the providing institution. One obvious advantage of in-course job-search activity is that there was, in theory, less likelihood of people 'slipping through the net'.

It should be noted, however, that tutors of SKILLNET courses more than once expressed the view that the situation was 'depressing', in that they

were working with people for whom they felt there was little real hope in the job market. Departmental morale was in more than one instance reported as 'low'; in one case, this was because, although many trainees were attracted to the particular high-tech course being offered, the tutors knew that the four major engineering firms in the area had closed down and local jobs in that field were very scarce. These tutors, and others too, reported that they had little or no time to liaise with employers and find out what their training needs were; or even to know the sort of vacancies that were most available. At the same time they acknowledged that if the courses they taught were to be fully useful, it was just this sort of information that needed to be accessed. Again, this seemed to be a grey area in terms of how the respective roles of SKILLNET and the institutions were perceived.

The evidence in this section suggests that courses were not necessarily geared to trainees' needs, certainly initially; but a degree of adaptation, both planned and extemporised, has taken place over time. This has in turn generated questions primarily related to resourcing, particularly of trainee support.

ISSUES OF SUPPLY: *SKILLNET*

Although SKILLNET is a facilitator rather than a provider of training, various characteristics of, and influences on, SKILLNET itself have had an impact on the provision, delivery and take-up of the QSI programme. This section attempts to identify the most important.

Effects of ESF funding criteria

The criteria for funding from the ESF have been alluded to several times (see Chapter 2 for a description), and their role in the design and planning of courses outlined. Although QSI courses were not solely determined by these criteria, many interviewees commented on the possibly unhelpful precedents that this funding had set. Large numbers of trainees required to be processed, both administratively and educationally – 1,000 places were specified for Phase 1. Several people commented that this severely decreased the work that could be done effectively. There was a feeling that SKILLNET should be helping a few people well; the more pressure there was to recruit numbers, the less SKILLNET could adequately service the trainees, particularly in terms of pre- and post-course counselling and of monitoring of course content. ESF funding also excluded people over the age of 25, who were felt to be in at least as much, if not more, need than unemployed young people. Only vocational courses were eligible for funding (as distinct from foundation or basic education courses); and courses had to contain an element of new technology. These conditions were thought to be inappropriate for many local people, who needed ongoing English and numeracy tuition; and who might well take up occupations in more traditional fields, such as, for example, heavy goods vehicle (HGV) driving – such a course, though proposed, had not been approved because of its ineligibility for ESF funding. Additionally, the time-scale imposed had created difficulties (see the third section of this chapter; and also Chapter 2). The combined effect of these constraints had been considerable.

However, there was also a major advantage, according to one educationist: that money which would otherwise have been unavailable had been directed towards specific educational problems attendant on urban redevelopment.

Lack of internal policy

As has been commented before, SKILLNET's development was often characterised by response to external conditions, such as the ESF funding criteria. Several interviewees, both within the SKILLNET administration and in providing institutions, expressed concern over what they termed the lack of clear policy direction: they reported that they were often not aware of who made decisions and on what basis.

Specific examples of this include an often-expressed need for systematic evaluation by SKILLNET of the QSI programme. Individual courses, such as those examined and validated by the City and Guilds of London Institute (C&G), could be said to be constantly evaluated. Additionally, counsellors visited as many courses as they could, and as frequently as possible, but were aware that this did not amount to a systematic monitoring of all SKILLNET courses and trainees.

A similar evaluative need was identified for vetting job vacancies which were notified to SKILLNET. In the placement-into-employment work, no systematic vetting of employers was carried out; employers were not required to give explicit information on their vacancies. It was pointed out that no guidelines existed within SKILLNET on vetting for health and safety matters nor for equal opportunities; it was suggested by one interviewee that this was because no equal opportunities policy existed within SKILLNET itself. There was therefore no basis for formulating such a policy in respect of employers. However, other participants remarked that LEA codes of practice would impinge on SKILLNET's own practices; and an equal opportunities policy was being discussed as a matter of priority. Individual vetting of employers was carried out where possible, based on the counsellors' previous practice in the ILEA careers service (as were other aspects of their work).

Another example of an area which some people thought would benefit from an overall policy was co-ordination between, and support for, course tutors. One tutor in an adult education centre suggested that tutors should be more thoroughly briefed by SKILLNET for course proposals; it was important that tutors, as well as heads of department, should be brought into the process early on. Reports on Phase 1 by SKILLNET counsellors noted that there was a need for tutors of like courses to meet each other.

Once or twice a concern was voiced about the dissemination of policy decisions: it was felt that this did not happen effectively.

SKILLNET as a partnership

These difficulties of internal policy may arguably have arisen as a result of SKILLNET's major task of co-ordinating between its different partners.

Positive judgement, though occasionally qualified, was generally given of both the value and the achievement of SKILLNET in sustaining a relationship between the disparate corporate bodies in the partnership (the LDDC, ILEA and LBN). An interviewee who was a senior officer in one of these bodies remarked that it was *'an amazing feat'* that there had been no break in this partnership in its two years of existence; SKILLNET had been characterised by a consistent willingness to co-operate in a political atmosphere which had made it difficult for it to happen at all. There was a common goal of regeneration, but the partners were aiming at this from different positions: LDDC policies were perceived as stemming from the development of property and business and therefore concerned

primarily with plant and housing; whereas the local authorities saw their responsibilities in terms of services to people. Polarisation of views was therefore a danger, though it was not inevitable.

A manager of a training agency saw that polarisation as being definitely detrimental: SKILLNET had to overcome the suspicion with which it was regarded by local people because of its relationship with the LDDC, whose image had generated tensions in the community. On the other hand, more than one educational administrator mentioned the lack of confidence which employers have had in what the FE sector can provide by way of training. These reservations may be turned on their head by noting, as several interviewees did, that SKILLNET, by drawing on expertise, information and support from all sectors, was in a unique position to win credibility on all sides.

Running through these discussions were the twin themes of partnership and ownership. One educationist was concerned that the partnership was not, in fact, a collaboration, in the sense of having joint strategies for agreed objectives, but was instead a form of loose co-operation. Possible justification of this judgement may be found in the remarks of one interviewee (the manager of a community training agency) who said that there seemed to be a vast range of quality in the SKILLNET programme. SKILLNET was not a brand name like 'St Michael': the product depended on the provider and she felt it was not possible to recommend another SKILLNET course to a trainee without knowing '*whether it had real input or had just been slotted into the timetable*'. She queried whether checks existed to ensure tutors were carrying out their tasks effectively. This point was also raised by the SKILLNET counsellors, part of whose work was to attempt course monitoring. But again the short duration of courses coupled with insufficient staffing resources generated problems in the task of comparison and quality control.

In other words, there appear to have been insufficient mechanisms to ensure that common objectives and strategies were instituted and followed up; or to appoint staff, either in SKILLNET or in the institutions, with specific responsiblity for overseeing them. This has led to a situation where, in the words of a senior administrator, 'scapegoating' could happen: when things have gone wrong, people (trainees, employers, administrators, tutors) have been able to lay the reponsibility for this on someone else in the system instead of '*being honest with themselves and each other*'.

An aspect of SKILLNET which attracted virtually no negative comment was its funding role. As Deloitte Haskins and Sells (1987) pointed out, '*the flow of public funds to various levels of vocational education and training provision is complex and does not match the institutional structure*'. SKILLNET was in part established as a mechanism for injecting funds (both public and private) more directly into areas of perceived need. Several interviewees in providing institutions commented on the tangible benefits of the enterprise in this respect: SKILLNET had enabled them to develop training initiatives at a pace and with material resources not otherwise possible. In a situation where college and departmental budgets were often diminishing in real terms and spending proposals had to be submitted a year in advance for equipment which would be out of date when it arrived, the 'up-front' support which SKILLNET could provide was greatly appreciated.

ISSUES OF DEMAND: Employers' requirements and trainees' needs

On the face of it, employers' requirements for trained and skilled staff would seem to be compatible with potential trainees' requirements for skills and jobs; even when, as Kennard (1985) pointed out, there were substantial obstacles in the way, both in provision and delivery of up-to-date training and in encouraging people (particularly local unemployed young people) to make use of that provision. However, the development of SKILLNET's QSI programme has in some way been an object lesson that such a meeting of interests does not necessarily exist.

Resourcing

As has been documented above, the resourcing needs of SKILLNET QSI's training provision for unemployed people – before, during and after their courses as well as in respect of course content – were far greater than had been envisaged. The individual guidance and support service which SKILLNET counsellors provided could only work when numbers were limited: it was not a service which could be offered to all SKILLNET trainees and this was felt to be something of a contradiction. In practice, this limitation was imposed by the fact that advice was given only to those trainees who sought it. In other words, those who benefited from the service were self-selected and arguably – at least in some cases – not the same as those who most needed it.

Concerns were voiced by counsellors and tutors about having to fill the gaps between different people's expectations of SKILLNET and the more problematic realities. This was particularly true of the placement-into-employment work. SKILLNET counsellors, whose responsibility this work had come to be, started to provide a bulletin to trainees of jobs vacancies which had been notified. But the team did not have access to mail merge and address label functions from the data base, which made the distribution of the vacancy bulletin tedious and slow. Sometimes vacancies were already filled by the time trainees were notified. The number of suitable vacancies fluctuated; but the average had been in the region of only 3 or 4 a week. Counsellors believed there was a question over whether SKILLNET should be doing this work with inadequate resources. At a later stage they ceased to ask employers to refer vacancies to them.

At the time of the evaluation, internal policy discussions were under way for rationalising placement work. One proposal was to create a separate function within SKILLNET, which could be a self-financing service to employers. The counsellors felt, however, that there were two main arguments against this. In the first place, they believed that maintaining contacts with employers should remain within the counsellors' remit, so that, for example, their advice and guidance to trainees would be relevant to the changing job market. They also felt that trainees who did not get jobs immediately would continue to need careers guidance and support. In the second place, they voiced the concern that a self-financing brokerage system would be impelled to take only readily 'marketable' trainees, who might amount to no more than 25 per cent of the SKILLNET trainee clientele. At the time, post-course counselling involved work which was quite distinct from the agency brief of making selections for particular vacancies. The counsellors expressed the view that if a simplistic notion of what 'getting a job' entails, both in effort and time, were allowed to predominate, many trainees would suffer yet more failures and employers might in any case still not be getting the kind of applicants they wanted. Work experience could play a useful role; but with implications again for resourcing. One counsellor had devoted a great deal of time to a post-course work experience scheme with British

Telecom involving just eight trainees. There was, above all, a query about how competitive SKILLNET could be with commercial employment agencies in the area.

If a different model were to be adopted, where establishments took more reponsibility for post-course counselling and placement into employment, questions could be raised about SKILLNET's role *vis-à-vis* the trainees. Thus one training agency in the SKILLNET programme was conducting its own job-search and placement activities, as well as most recruitment and on-course counselling. It might ultimately be difficult to define the grounds (apart from those of course funding) on which trainees should be counted as SKILLNET trainees – particularly for the purpose of conducting a head-count of those who had got jobs.

There was no doubt, according to most interviewees, of the need for a much closer relationship between education/training providers and employers – part of SKILLNET's *raison d'être* was to occupy the middle ground between them and in consequence to deliver more people into the jobs which employers wanted filled. But it is perhaps worth asking what the nature of that middle ground was and whether it was, even in principle, capable of being occupied, whether by SKILLNET or training providers or some other agency. Differences of time-scale, discussed in Chapter 3 and taken up in Chapter 8, suggest that even its definition may be contentious.

The range of trainees' needs

SKILLNET's 'open-door' policy towards trainees together with the failure of earlier educational experience to fulfil their basic needs meant that many trainees came to SKILLNET as a last resort; some applicants may even have had special needs. It has been noted that neither the institutions nor the SKILLNET staff had adequate resources to deal with the demands this created; in extreme circumstances, this meant that trainees were turned away. But is was not simply a question of resources. '*There is no such thing as an open door*', in the judgement of one counsellor. It was suggested that three broad groups of trainees could be identified:

- Those who were already basically employable, but needed some specific training.
- Those who were motivated and knew what they were interested in doing, but needed some help achieving their aims.
- Those who were unclear about what they wanted or needed and required a great deal of support. These were people who might have learning difficulties and a history of educational and employment 'failure'; additionally, they might possess inadequate incomes and/or experience housing problems.

In the counsellors' opinion, the first group was quite small and other provision existed for them. The third group was the least well catered for by any provision and least visible in any planning. Nor was SKILLNET in a position to help as much as the counsellors would have liked; these were people the counsellors felt it was important to try to support in a variety of ways.

It was the middle group, consquently, on whom SKILLNET's and institutional resources should, in the counsellors' opinion, sensibly have been concentrated; many of those people had clear ideas about careers, but needed to make their goals realistic and their achievements systematic. It had been suggested to the counsellors that SKILLNET stood to gain most credibility with employers and the public by helping to deliver these people into jobs.

What SKILLNET should have been saying to, and doing for, the third group, however, had not been satisfactorily resolved in principle. Some training agencies, for instance, whose remit included placing as many trainees as possible in jobs, were reluctant to take on 'unemployable' trainees; they wanted to exercise some selection process. Other training agencies whose remit included a 'social' element – such as Project Fullemploy – stressed that *'the real key is personal development'*. But they too had to select trainees, because more people applied for courses than could be accommodated; and this was done in a pre-course interview in which tutors could assess trainees' motivation and how realistic their expectations were.

It is arguable that the problem could not have been resolved by SKILLNET, whatever its policy or resources: short training courses are unlikely by themselves to redress ten years of 'failure' in compulsory education, which has been exacerbated by the experience of unemployment. But a further problem for SKILLNET counsellors here was the fact that there were no clear guidelines about how much time should be allocated to general open-ended advice and support as distinct from SKILLNET-oriented advice. They were concerned, moreover, that by appearing to operate an 'open-door' policy SKILLNET might have raised false hopes in some people.

Employers' needs and the labour market factor

It had become clear to the counsellors that trainees needed to be alerted to certain realities, such as the fact the SKILLNET could help them with applications and so forth, but could not guarantee them a job. However, even supposing the trainees' expectations could be adjusted and their employability enhanced, there are persistent problems pertaining to the labour market, as has been discussed in Chapter 3. Employers' needs are not always clear and there may be a difference of view within firms about what is being looked for in a potential employee. Senior management are likely to talk about 'attitudes' and 'flexibility'; personnel staff may stress the importance of qualities such as 'fitting in', 'punctuality' and 'enthusiasm'; supervisors are interested in finding people to do the particular job they are being hired for.

Other, more structural, quesions complicate the picture. As one interviewee put it, *'to attempt to solve the most extreme* [skills] *mismatch in the country by a programme of thirteen-week high-tech courses was naïve'*. In practice, this meant that the counsellors sometimes felt they were sending people out to be rejected yet again and gave the example of an electronics trainee who, at interview, was offered only a warehouse job. They felt caught in a double-bind: employers tended to say 'send along your best ones', which placed the counsellors in an invidious position if they attempted to make that sort of judgement, but would be likely to add more failures to someone's experience if they did not. One interviewee summed up the dilemma facing SKILLNET this way: *'We can't keep saying to trainees that it is an open door while maintaining to employers that SKILLNET offers quality training. These are parallel lines which can't meet and the problem has to be confronted.'*

Types of training provision

Some commentators on training provision have identified three levels or types of skill acquisition: job-specific, work-related and personal/social. Although these are broad areas rather than categories, it is arguable that employers are most interested in the job-specfic end of such a spectrum. Training at a job-specfic level – probably through some kind of work experience scheme – seems, on the face of things, most likely to increase a person's employability. However, the steady disappearance of apprenticeships and day-release courses (for which employers themselves and government policies are responsible), together with the replacement of

Industry Training Boards by non-statutory training organisations, has created a gap in training provision. Institutions in the FE sector are now being required to fill this gap. But the FE sector, broadly speaking, also places emphasis on a variety of work-related (or 'transferable') skills and some personal/social education. Not all colleges see it as their main responsibility to provide training specific to particular jobs, as evidence in this chapter tends to show. This has been for various reasons, not least the difference in time-scale between educational and industrial innovation. SKILLNET courses have so far been largely, though not exclusively, channelled through existing FE provision. It is likely to take a long time to establish with employers the links required to design training of a more specific kind.

SUMMARY

Different providing institutions had contrasting remits, structures, priorities and atmospheres, which exerted both perceptible and intangible influences. Institutional and curricular variations impinged on the delivery of training and its outcomes, and herein lie some of the major strengths and weaknesses of SKILLNET as a network. SKILLNET QSI was – through its providing institutions and through the courses themselves – part of the post-16 education field and also part of the training-agency field. SKILLNET was theoretically in a good position to speed up the provision of training to match labour market requirements, but in practice the provision varied in relevance and responsiveness to the needs of both trainees and employers.

This was in part due to the fact that SKILLNET was conceived to combat somewhat abstract notions of labour shortages and high local unemployment rather than to address actual employers' or trainees' needs. Lacking this input meant that, in practice, it was set up according to external factors, such as the ESF criteria and the differing contours of participating institutions' philosophies, staffing and curricular capacity. The impact of refinements which have been made to SKILLNET policy and practice – such as the gradual shift towards devolving responsibility and resources for trainee support on to providing institutions – were taking some time to be felt.

Questions have arisen at different levels of operation about how SKILLNET QSI courses could attempt, in principle as well as in practice, to confront the array of apparently conflicting demands which SKILLNET's overall aim imposed on the programme. In particular, while they did not themselves necessarily believe this to be the ultimate test of SKILLNET's success, many interviewees were at pains to point out that SKILLNET's credibility had come to be dependent on the numbers of trainees delivered into jobs. Consequently, although it is not clear (given the evidence above and in Chapter 3) how, in the short term, the wants and needs of trainees could be made coterminous with those of employers – or indeed, whether such a *rapprochement* could sensibly be attempted – it is clear that there was a danger that SKILLNET QSI would find difficulty meeting, effectively and on a large scale, the wants and needs of either.

This was the context within which staff, in institutions and in the SKILLNET administration, were carrying out their work with trainees, which was the point, so to say, at which the above-mentioned contradictions were likely to meet. It is thus worth emphasising the high quality of at least some aspects of SKILLNET provision and the commitment to progress evinced by participants.

5

TRAINEES' EXPERIENCES: THE POSTAL QUESTIONNAIRE AND FOLLOW-UP INTERVIEWS

INTRODUCTION

Given the innovative intentions of the SKILLNET QSI programme together with the strengths and weaknesses of its operation – as highlighted in the previous two chapters – evidence from trainees themselves was thought to be a crucial element in the evaluation. Accordingly, this chapter examines information from trainees about their experiences of the SKILLNET QSI programme in the light of trainees' previous educational and employment experience and personal characteristics. The evidence was gathered from a postal questionnaire sent to trainees on Phases 1, 2 and 3 and from personal interviews with a number of trainees (see Appendices [C] and [D] respectively). Illuminative evidence from the latter was used to round out data from the postal questionnaire in a predominantly qualitative fashion.

Young unemployed adults in inner city environments have been the subject of much study and, while it is not within the scope of the report to discuss this evidence in any detail, it is nonetheless important to offer a thumb-nail sketch of conditions affecting the population from whom SKILLNET trainees are recruited (second section). Evidence from the survey of – and interviews with – SKILLNET trainees provided some interesting insights into the operation of the QSI programme and their experiences of it; some points to bear in mind in assessing the evidence are outlined in the third section. Responses from trainees are examined according to information received, first on their personal background and history (section on 'Trainees' characteristics') and secondly about their experiences of SKILLNET courses (section on 'Trainees and their courses'). Discussion of the emerging themes concludes the chapter ('General comments' section).

A SKETCH OF THE SOCIAL BACKGROUND

Some understanding, however superficial, of conditions affecting people's lives in the areas where the vast majority of SKILLNET trainees live is central to an appreciation of the challenges young unemployed adults face and the corresponding tasks incumbent on any education or training initiative directed towards them. The context of urban deprivation, coupled with the challenges this offers to educational delivery, has been alluded to in Chapter 3. Within this situation, other factors can be identified which have a direct bearing on young unemployed people's lives.

Patterns and social effects of unemployment

Some indication of the structural changes in local industrial patterns and consequent employment opportunities was given in Chapters 2 and 3. With particular reference to young people, ILEA Statistics for 1981–3 and 1984–6 showed a consistent general trend: unemployed school-leavers formed a high proportion of unemployed people in the inner city; and job vacancies were continuously fewer than numbers of people out of work. Only in June 1986 was the shortfall in vacancies compared with young people seeking work less than 1,000.

The most recent statistics (January 1988) for Tower Hamlets, Southwark and Hackney give overall unemployment rates of 18, 16 and 19 per cent respectively. Men form a much higher proportion of registered unemployed than women (24, 21, and 25 per cent of men in the respective boroughs).

Average duration of unemployment in these boroughs was more or less the same: around a year for men, and between eight and nine months for women. The likelihood of ceasing to be unemployed was a little over 1 in 3 for men and around 2 in 5 for women, though there was generally a higher likelihood of younger people ceasing to be unemployed than older people (source: London Research Centre). Similarly, the shorter time a person has been unemployed, the higher are his or her chances of finding work. However, there were more than twice as many people who had been unemployed for over a year (and half of these had been unemployed for over 3 years) as had been unemployed for three months or less. As remarked, the younger a person is, the higher his or her chances of becoming re-employed; but again there were one-and-a-half times as many unemployed people in the 16–24 age group as in the 45+ age group. With the 1982 census, statistics on unemployment ceased to be collected according to ethnic origin, but one borough was currently working on estimates of ethnic minority unemployment being twice as high as the average. Unemployment rates according to occupational category similarly ceased to be recorded, but job losses were reckoned to be mostly in the areas of paper printing, clothing, engineering, food processing and transport; while new jobs were being created in the office sector (source: London Borough of Southwark). This may partly explain the current differential between male and female unemployment. The greater propensity for women to take part-time, casual jobs no doubt has some additional bearing on the figures.

A further remark to be made in this context is that unemployment tends to run in families: the father's employment status is a predictor of the young person's employment status. However, statistics – as we know – provide only one dimension. As White (1987) points out, '*. . . although they may appear to others as The Unemployed, to themselves they are simply unemployed at present . . . unemployment is . . . seen as . . . something which must be got though, endured and overcome*'. Unemployment, moreover, may have serious personal and social consequences, including damage to health and well-being, as Fagin (1981) and the Health Education Council (1987), among others, have suggested: '*The unemployed and their families have considerably worse physical and mental health than those in work . . . Now there is substantial evidence of unemployment causing a deterioration in mental health.*' Unemployment is linked with high levels of poverty (Townsend et al., 1987; Corrigan et al., 1987) and with lower than previous pay if paid work is resumed (White, 1983).

A detailed study of school-leavers in one area of London's dockland over the period 1981–6 (Church, 1987) showed, however, that '*in this inner city area rapid changes in the local labour market have not produced an unemployed sub-class of young people*'; instead, '*a lower quartile exists who . . . are not able to establish themselves in permanent employment*'. These people tend to be in and out of work, and their jobs are 'peripheral' ones characterised by low pay and insecurity.

Although, as White remarks, unemployment is not a defining condition in itself, it is almost always linked with a cluster of other deprivations for the individual concerned (see, for example, Townsend et al., 1987; Corrigan et al., 1987). Some of the comments made by trainees (see particularly Chapters 6 and 7) indicate the inextricability of these conditions from that of unemployment. The major difficulties likely to be encountered can be grouped under the following themes.

Ethnicity and racial tension

According to ILEA statistics concerning secondary school pupils in 1985–6, so-called ethnic minority groups formed just under half the total school population. In Division 5 (Tower Hamlets) this figure was 56 per cent and in Division 4 (Hackney) 69 per cent. Separating the ethnic groupings, the figures show that people of Caribbean origin made up nearly a quarter of the school population in the borough of Hackney, while people of Bangladeshi origin constituted over one-third of school students in Tower Hamlets. This latter figure compares with an overall ILEA average of 6 per cent. Hackney had a more diverse ethnic spread than other boroughs in the SKILLNET catchment area: people of Indian, people of Turkish and people of Irish origin each made up somewhat under 10 per cent of the school population in Hackney. In Tower Hamlets, by contrast, the two major groups were of Bangladeshi and of English, Scottish or Welsh origin respectively, with all other groups together constituting only a fifth of school students. This complex distribution of people, some with distinct cultural identities and perhaps also with intra-cultural conflicts, has created challenges for providers of education and training, especially in ensuring equality of opportunity.

This general situation – racial and cultural diversity in a deprived inner city area – is one in which racial tension, harassment and discrimination are features of daily life for some people. An indication of this may be found in a new campaign launched by the Metropolitan Police in early 1988 throughout Tower Hamlets, to combat racial harassment because of a 25 per cent increase in alleged incidents in the last year (*The Guardian*, 1 March 1988). A longer-term, less visible problem is, as one report put it (Burney, 1988), that '*without positive action, members of ethnic minority groups may forever fail to join mainstream economic life . . . a real will to solve the racial inequalities in the inner cities has so far been lacking.*' The well-documented (see, for example, Brown, 1984) phenomenon of racial discrimination in employment, as in other important areas of life such as health care (see, for example, Mares et al., 1985), and its interaction with poverty, constitutes structural discouragement on a large scale to people of ethnic minorities. Counteracting the effects on individuals of such discouragement is another challenge for providers of training. Some allusion to how these challenges have been met in particular institutions in the SKILLNET QSI programme was made in Chapter 4.

Homelessness

The interaction of poverty, unemployment and housing difficulties as they affect young adults is discussed by White (1987): '*Low incomes and poor housing conditions do nothing to create an environment in which long-term youth unemployment can be . . . easily managed. Leaving home may,* in extremis, *be the only conflict limitation strategy available.*' But leaving the parental home may, of course, simply increase the difficulties. Having nowhere adequate to live is a problem affecting increasing numbers of young adults. The housing agency Shelter, for instance, reported that the average leaving age from the parental home is 19; a quarter who had left said they had found it quite or very difficult to find somewhere to live (*The Guardian* 2 March 1988). The housing crisis in London may be exemplified by the fact that nearly 2,000 people between the ages of 16 and 19 pass through a single emergency accommodation hostel every year. The upper age limit in this hostel had to be reduced from 25 to 19 in 1985, because of the increasing numbers seeking refuge (*The Guardian* 2 March 1988). One may assume that the shortage of accommodation for young people affects those who are also unemployed even more severely. Since we did not solicit systematic information about housing or income in the survey, there is no first-hand evidence of this problem amongst SKILLNET trainees; but the mobility of the data base population – that is to say, the number of questionnaires returned to sender and of unobtainable telephone numbers – might be thought a partial reflection of this.

The option of leaving the parental home, however, may well be reduced by the new national arrangements for the payment of unemployment and supplementary benefits.

State benefits

Unemployed young people who register for state benefits are surrounded by statutory regulations. Eligibility for benefit is closely monitored and is likely to be more narrowly defined as new government policies are implemented. Moreover, unemployed people may be seeking more than one kind of benefit. For example, a survey conducted for the housing agency Shelter (*The Guardian* 2 March 1988) noted that a third of unemployed young people living away from the parental home were claiming housing benefit. Unemployed people with children, and single parents in particular, are likely to be experiencing some degree of poverty and to be claiming supplementary benefits of one kind and another. This is a situation characterised by some policy-makers as 'the dependency culture', which they would like to see replaced by an 'enterprise culture'. Discussion of this lies outside the scope of the present report but nonetheless has implications for people who are potential SKILLNET QSI recruits. Changes in regulations governing eligibility for a range of statutory benefits were introduced by HM Government in spring 1988 and were in part designed to complement the government approach to training. Broadly speaking, politicians have been exploring ways of encouraging more unemployed people to seek training or retraining. A principle which has some support is to make joining a government training scheme (such as the Youth Training Scheme or Employment Training) a condition of retaining eligibility for claiming unemployment benefit.

Unemployment, then, may well be associated with other problems without easy remedy, and – particularly in an area like London's dockland where some people are employed and visibly prospering – may carry social and personal consquences in its wake (see, for example, Corrigan et al., 1987; Townsend et al., 1987; Church, 1987). These need to be fully recognised by educational practitioners attempting to alleviate the educational problems associated with unemployment, such as lack of specific skills or qualifications. The extent to which SKILLNET courses took account of these other factors – as was pointed out in Chapter 4 – varied according to the type of institution offering the provision

POINTS RELATING TO THE SURVEY

The questionnaire

A postal questionnaire was sent to trainees who had attended courses on Phases 1–3 of the SKILLNET QSI programme. It sought evidence of trainees' experiences of SKILLNET – the sort of benefits they had derived from their courses and the kinds of changes they would like to see – together with some factual information that would help to contextualise these experiences. Data about the types and dates of courses taken were therefore elicited and information about trainees' background was gathered, including such things as ethnic origin, previous educational qualifications and length of previous unemployment. An overall response rate of just over 40 per cent was achieved (see Appendix [C] for a more detailed description of questionnaire administration).

Follow-up interviews

In order to acquire some richer circumstantial evidence than could be sought in a necessarily brief postal survey, personal interviews were conducted with 65 SKILLNET trainees, some of whom were still taking courses. The majority of interviewees, however, had finished courses and had embarked on various other activities (see Appendix [D] for a more detailed description of interview procedure). The interviews were

administered informally and as often as possible in settings that were likely to be familiar to the interviewees. Since it would have been somewhat artificial to ask questions about SKILLNET in isolation from the rest of people's lives and activities, opportunities were provided for interviewees to discuss their preoccupations throughout and, having had their major remarks read back to them, to add further comments at the end. One of the values of this exercise was that it pointed up the need for systematic follow-up work with trainees, of the kind that has been done by the counsellors with many of the people who have started SKILLNET QSI courses. Personal interviews provided an invaluable means of getting a sense of what different courses meant in different people's lives and careers. Some thought might usefully be given in the future to the possibilities of building in interviews with trainees into the SKILLNET programme on a scale which up till now has not been possible. Interviews could be used by SKILLNET both as an effective method of obtaining feedback on courses and as a way of giving trainees a role as participants in the process of course design and development (see, for example, James et al, 1984, on supporting unemployed young people through group-work and jointly negotiated activities).

Interpretation of evidence

Data elicited from the questionnaire and from the follow-up interviews need, as always, to be treated with circumspection. An overall response rate of 40 per cent to the postal questionnaire means that the evidence obtained may be biased in favour of one group of trainees rather than another – to take an obvious example, more replies may have come from people with greater confidence or facility in written expression than the SKILLNET average. It may be that trainees with strong feelings and views, either positive or negative, were the ones who replied to the questionnaire or who agreed to be interviewed. Equally, the connection between evidence from the postal survey and evidence from course visits is indirect, in that the survey covered Phases 1, 2 and 3 while visits were of necessity conducted during Phases 3 and 4.

TRAINEES' CHARACTERISTICS

This section covers the educational and personal characteristics of trainees, which form the background to their comments and experiences reported on in the following section.

Residence

Information on trainees' home location was available from a data base held at the SKILLNET headquarters which gives addresses of trainees on all phases. There was considerable consistency across all phases concerning trainees' residence. Proportions of trainees recruited from different areas stayed broadly the same on all phases; place of residence does not seem to have played a part in encouraging or discouraging attendance as compared with enrolment. The chart in Figure 5.1 referring to people attending courses on Phase 3 – is representative of the overall pattern of residence, across all three phases and for enrollers as well as attenders.

The docklands and their hinterland were the areas on which SKILLNET was specifically targeted and most people came from the immediate docklands area and the East End, followed by those who lived in what might be called the hinterlands (other East or South East London postal districts). As can be seen from Figure 5.1, a few came from 'other' places – but 9 out of 10 of these came from other London districts. (See Appendix [G] for a more detailed description and discussion of the areas covered by the phrase 'docklands'.)

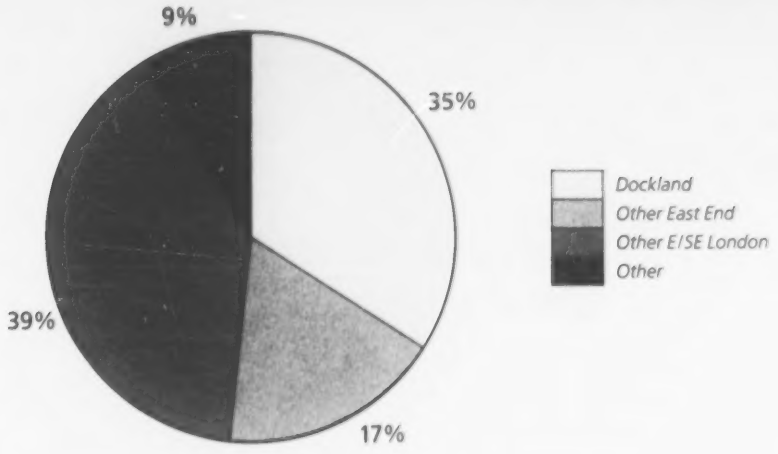


FIGURE 5.1 ***Trainees' residence (attenders, Phase 3).***
Base: 183 trainees.

Ethnicity

Respondents to the questionnaire were asked to give an indication of their ethnic origin. Twelve per cent said they were of African origin, 31 per cent Afro-Caribbean, 13 per cent Asian and 32 per cent European (including the UK). One per cent of respondents said they had 'other' origins and 11 per cent chose not to answer this question. Given the ethnic patterns outlined in the second section of this chapter, this seems an expected distribution of responses, except perhaps as regards those of European/UK origin, for whom the figure is somewhat lower than anticipated. The figures would, however, seem to indicate overall that the SKILLNET courses were reaching a cross-section of the local population. Differences apparently linked with ethnic origin were observed in the course of examining the data, particularly in relation to trainees' subsequent activity (see Chapter 7).

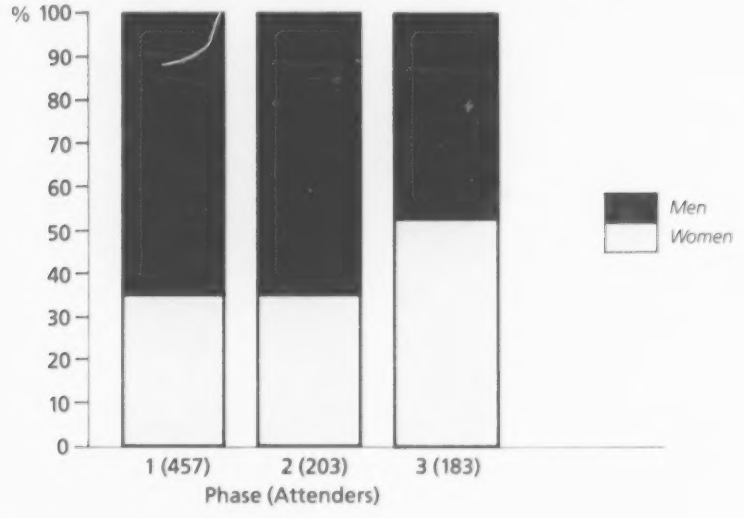


FIGURE 5.2 ***Trainees' gender.***

Gender

Information from SKILLNET's own data base showed a substantial change in the ratio between the sexes, from a high preponderance of men on Phases 1 and 2 to about equal numbers of both sexes on Phase 3, as shown in Figure 5.2.

Respondents were asked to complete a section on gender, which revealed that 53 per cent were male and 47 per cent were female, indicating that questionnaire respondents were roughly equally distributed between the sexes. More women replied to the questionnaire, therefore, than would have been expected on the basis of numbers of trainees. This may be due to a more general propensity among women to respond to requests for information and so forth. Some gender-based differences were observed in examining other data, particularly in relation to types of courses taken (see next section on 'Trainees and their courses').

Age

Respondents were asked to say how old they were. Given the eligibility criteria for the ESF grant (through which most courses were partly funded: see Chapter 2), it is not surprising that very few were under 18 years of age. About 10 per cent of the sample, however, were over 25. This could be because they had reached that age subsequent to taking a SKILLNET course or because they were women who had attended those courses targeted at older women. Distribution over the remaining ages was fairly even, with a slight peak at 24.

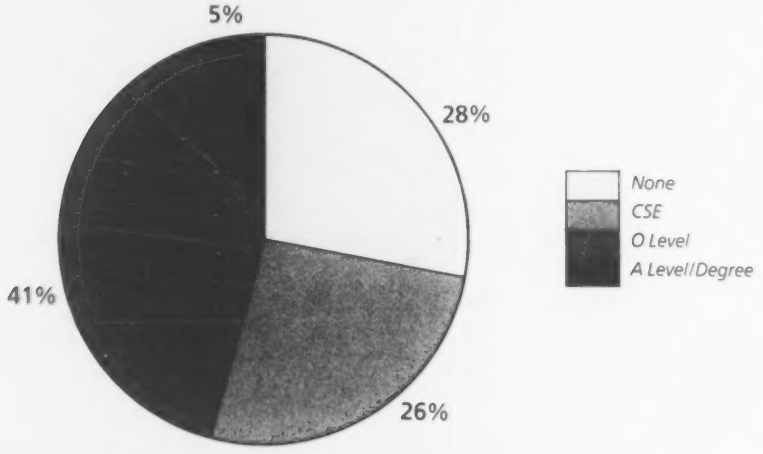


FIGURE 5.3 ***Respondents' previous qualifications.***
Base: 275 respondents.

Previous qualifications

Respondents were asked to give the numbers of any CSE, O level or other qualifications they held. As can be seen from Figure 5.3, over a quarter said they had no qualifications at all, while just over a quarter had CSEs only and over two-fifths had one or more O levels. A very small number had A levels or degrees.

Additionally, around one-third of all respondents had a variety of vocational or further education qualifications, such as C&G (City and Guilds of London Institute) certificates or RSA (Royal Society of Arts) certificates or BTEC (Business and Technician Education Council) ordinary and higher certificates. These figures suggest a slightly wider spread of qualifications amongst respondents than might have been anticipated from the educational background data on qualifications given in Chapter 3. The figures tend to confirm existing evidence that unemployment affects people with any level of qualification, but particularly those with low levels, since well over half the respondents had either no qualifications or CSEs only.

Trainees who were interviewed were also asked at what age they had left school. About half of them had left school at the age of 16 or younger; but around a quarter had stayed at school until they were 18 or older. Interviewees were then asked if they had undertaken any education or training since leaving school but before taking a SKILLNET course, and

nearly two-thirds said they had. There was, generally speaking, a discernible relationship between these previous courses and what people were doing on SKILLNET; and trainees tended mostly to have quite definite views about what they were doing and why. Usually, the SKILLNET course was seen in terms of furthering a career pattern and acquiring germane skills, particularly in 'new' technology. Occasionally, an interviewee felt that a previous career choice had been a mistake or had been overtaken by other circumstances and SKILLNET was seen as an opportunity to retrain.

Activity immediately preceding *SKILLNET*

Respondents to the postal questionnaire were asked what they had been doing immediately before they started their SKILLNET course, the ESF criteria having specified that the courses should be for unemployed people. Respondents could give more than one answer to this question (though only a few did so), so not all categories are mutually exclusive.

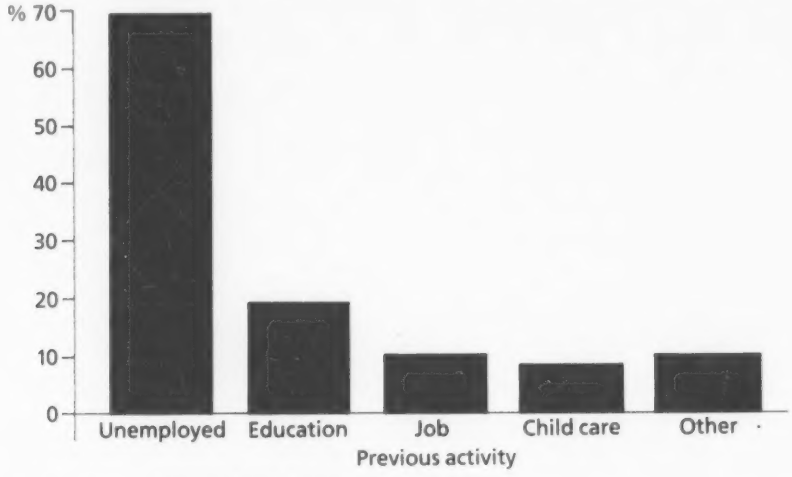


FIGURE 5.4 ***Respondents' previous activity.***
Base: 266 respondents.

Nearly 70 per cent said they were unemployed, while 10 per cent had been working full-time (mostly men) or part-time. Eighteen per cent (but more men than women) said they had been involved in other training or education; 8 per cent (nearly all women) gave child care as their previous occupation. Involvement in the Youth Training Scheme or the MSC Community Programme was small and very few had been doing voluntary work. The evidence therefore suggests that most respondents were unemployed before starting SKILLNET and not involved in a great deal of supplementary activity. Arguably, therefore, these were people for whom a course would seem to offer either a first step towards getting a job or a way of usefully filling in time. This view accords with respondents' expressed reasons for taking a course (see next section). Figure 5.4 gives a picture of respondents' activity immediately preceding their SKILLNET courses, according to the total number of responses: some people were doing more than one thing.

It was felt to be important to discover for how long people tended to have been unemployed. Forty per cent said they had been unemployed for over a year and a quarter said between 6 and 12 months. In other words, two-thirds of respondents were long-term unemployed. (Nearly three-quarters of respondents over the age of 25 came into this category.) The remaining third fell into two equal groups, those who had been unemployed for under three months and those who had been unemployed between three and six months. Of all those who were unemployed, 47 per cent were women and 53 per cent were men – the same overall proportion as for all respondents. The distribution in terms of ethnic origin for those unemployed was also similar to that for all respondents, except that

unemployed White people (particularly those unemployed for over a year) perhaps formed a slightly higher proportion than would have been expected. Although numbers in these separate categories are small (which means that definitive statements would be out of place), two separate factors may account for this finding. Many of the area's ethnic minority people have been in the UK for only a short time, while a number of the long-term unemployed Whites may have deep-seated problems not related solely to lack of skills training.

Interviewees were asked if they had held any job since leaving school: two-thirds said they had, while a third had been continuously unemployed. People tended to have had a variety of jobs in 'marginal' employment, such as temping and part-time agency work or jobs on goverment-sponsored schemes; some had been in full-time employment but had been made redundant when firms shut down. Those with children were more likely to have worked part-time in such areas as school catering, promotional cosmetics, packing or clerical work: some combined more than one part-time job. A few people had begun training in a trade like motor mechanics; a very few had held supervisory or managerial posts. This evidence tends to bear out the findings of a recent survey of dockland school-leavers (Church and Ainley, 1988), which suggested that there are many people in the dockland area who are not permanently unemployed but *'for whom periods of unemployment are routinely interspersed by low-wage, insecure, dead-end jobs'*.

It is fairly clear therefore, from the figures in this section relating to respondents' characteristics that SKILLNET QSI courses consistently attracted the kinds of people for whom they were intended: young unemployed adults of both sexes living in the docklands areas (broadly defined) and from the main ethnic groups found in those areas. The following section examines the reactions of respondents to these courses and suggests what the implication might be for the SKILLNET QSI programme.

TRAINEES AND THEIR COURSES

This section attempts to look at some of the salient relationships between trainees' characteristics and their experiences of SKILLNET, such as what courses they chose and how satisfied they claimed to be with those courses. Discussion of what trainees went on to do next, and how their SKILLNET courses seem to have been related to that, is undertaken in Chapters 6 and 7.

Reasons for taking a course

Respondents were invited to say why they had chosen to take a SKILLNET course. A variety of reasons were given, although some common themes emerged. Well over a third of all respondents, for instance, gave a reason connected with employment, such as *'I thought it would help me get a job'* or *'the course fitted in with the job I wanted to do'*. About a quarter gave reasons connected with learning new skills or improving existing ones, as the following quote from a trainee suggests: *'I thought that computers were the age of tomorrow, so that when I was ready to go back to work, I'd have up-to-date skills.'* Other trainees (about 20 per cent), however, hoped that the courses would be useful in a general sense, in enhancing their experience and knowledge. Ten per cent felt they wanted to do something useful while unemployed or as an alternative to being unemployed and bored, and saw SKILLNET as a way of fulfilling those needs. Other reasons given included wishing to update or revise knowledge gained at school; to gain qualifications; to undertake practical work or work experience; or to use the course, in the words of one trainee, as *'a launch pad to get to college to do a full-time course'*.

Some respondents (10 per cent) also mentioned that they had seen publicity which interested them or had been recommended to take courses by friends or relations, and about the same number were attracted by the description of particular courses.

The reasons people gave for taking SKILLNET courses did not appear to vary significantly according to either gender or ethnic origin. These same factors, on the other hand, do seem to have affected people's choice of course and what difficulties arose for them (see below).

Courses taken

Respondents were asked to list the courses they had taken and to enter the place and date of each course. Most people had taken only one course, under one-fifth had taken two courses and a very few had taken three or more. One-third of respondents had taken an office/keyboarding skills course and over a quarter had done a course in computing. Less than one-fifth had taken an electronics course. Ten per cent had taken a motor mechanics course and the same number had done one of the driving courses offered on Phase 1.

SKILLNET courses do not, according to the replies received, seem notably to have helped overturn traditional choices. Most of those taking electronics courses were men (only two women said they had taken such a course), one women said she had taken a building course and no women reported having taken a motor mechanics course. The majority of respondents, on the other hand, who took an office/keyboarding skills course were women (about four-fifths).

Dropping out

In view of the high drop-out rate in the early stages of SKILLNET QSI, we wanted to find out whether people had given up their course before completing it and if so, why. It emerged that 45 per cent of respondents had dropped out. Of these people, about half gave reasons associated with the course, such as that the work was 'boring' or 'badly organised' or the tutors were 'unhelpful'. As one trainee explained, '*I feel that due to the unconventional, almost casual, approach to study that SKILLNET offers, there is sometimes a lack of cohesion and consistency from both students and teaching staff, resulting in fluctuating standards of achievement . . .*' About one-quarter of respondents appeared, therefore, to have given up a SKILLNET course through dissatisfaction. Moreover, telephone follow-up work indicated that many people's reasons for not having filled in and returned the questionnaire were to do with their dissatisfaction with the courses. However, twice as many men as women expressed this kind of opinion. Additionally, people who previously had achieved one or more O levels were somewhat less likely to drop out than people with no qualifications or CSEs only. This may be because the achievement of O levels predisposes people to feel that, having already achieved something through the educational system, they are more likely to gain satisfaction from other courses they undertake.

About a third of respondents – but twice as many women as men – said they had given up because of personal circumstances, such as moving house, illness or difficulties with child care. Over half of these respondents were of Afro-Caribbean origin. Just over a quarter of those who gave up said they had left the course to do something else, mostly starting work or else beginning an apprenticeship or launching on other studies. Men were much more likely to have given up a course for job- or training-related reasons than women: they outnumbered women in both these categories by nearly 3 to 1.

A few stated that they had not completed the course because it had been cancelled.

Neither type of course nor institution seems to have made any statistical difference to whether people dropped out, nor to why they did so. Nor was it manifestly significant which phase of the QSI programme trainees had been on. However, it is clear from trainees' comments in the final open-ended section of the questionnaire and from some of the course-based evidence discussed in Chapter 4 that, in reality, much did depend on institutional structures and approaches. In addition, according to figures derived from SKILLNET's monitoring of Phase 4, the pattern of drop-out showed that some courses were emerging as more successful than others at incorporating lessons from previous experience.

Perceived difficulties with SKILLNET

The needs of the client group (discussed in Chapter 3), together with the early difficulties in the operation of SKILLNET QSI (discussed in Chapter 2), made it possible that some trainees would have experienced some degree of difficulty with their courses. Trainees were accordingly asked whether they had experienced any difficulties during their SKILLNET course. Respondents from all three phases were about equally divided between those who said they had experienced some difficulty and those who said they had not.

Of those who had experienced some difficulty, the reasons given (which are not mutually exclusive) were as follows:

- just under half claimed that the course was not what they had expected;
- about the same number (but twice as many men as women) said the allowance had not been enough to cover their expenses;
- two-fifths were disappointed that there were no recognised qualifications at the end of their courses;
- over a quarter said they could not tell how well they were doing in the course-work;
- under one-fifth found the journey a problem;
- for something like 10 per cent, the course was too much like school;
- ten per cent said they had domestic responsibilities which caused problems: the vast majority of these were women and over three-quarters were of Afro-Caribbean origin.

Very few people said they found the work too hard. Quite a few people (about one-fifth) added other problems to the list: the majority were, in general terms, course-related; half as many were tutor-related and half as many as these were personal, such as ill health. Some people complained about 'lack of organisation': *'Half the time the organisers and teachers did not know what was happening.'*

Difficulties arising from domestic responsibilities (mainly affecting women, as noted above) sometimes remained intractable, as quotations from some of them demonstrate. One woman found that:

> *'the local nursery has a three year waiting list. Child-minders are £50.00* [a week] *for the two younger kids . . . Things have got to get better – they can't get any worse. It doesn't do me no good to cry, though, with the three of them – I cry when I'm on my own.'*

Another woman encountered this difficulty:

> *'I was told there was a crèche . . . but they couldn't fit us in regularly in spite of all the publicity. I had to get up at 7 a.m. to get us both ready to go on the bus and arrive in time to settle him in before the class started. Then they'd say, "I'm sorry , there's no room for him today".'*

Yet another woman commented on the relief that the crèche afforded her:

> *'The course work's fine – it's finding the time to do it. I'm so tired by the evenings that I can't concentrate; it's a vicious circle, it leads to more depression . . . I have found it hard, but I wouldn't have been able to do the course at all if there hadn't been a crèche.'*

Difficulties experienced by trainees, however, did not lead inevitably to a decision not to complete their courses. Forty-six per cent of trainees who encountered problems nonetheless remained on their courses (whereas two-thirds of those who had no problems finished their courses). This is possibly a testament to the perseverance of some trainees (as well as to the help of the councellors), since airing their difficulties was in itself sometimes a problem: *'We talked about it amongst ourselves. Most of us were too afraid to speak to the tutors . . .' 'I didn't talk over the course with the tutors . . . because they were quite often not there. They'd give us some work and then go off for a while.'* Talking with other people ostensibly in a position to help, such as course tutors, seems not to have necessarily yielded practical improvement: *'The person in charge told us we'd have to put up with it – there wasn't anything he could do to make things better* [referring to lack of organisation for SKILLNET trainees in the college].'

Perceived benefits of doing SKILLNET

Respondents were asked to assess the usefulness of SKILLNET courses according to seven specified categories; Figure 5.5 illustrates the broad pattern of responses.

FIGURE 5.5 ***Benefits from SKILLNET.***
Base: 275 respondents.

A majority of respondents thought that their SKILLNET courses had benefited them in various ways, with the exception of getting a job. Three-fifths of respondents thought they had learnt skills which would be useful in a job and about the same number thought they had gained in self-confidence; even more people (nearly two-thirds) thought SKILLNET had helped them learn something they did not know they could do. Slightly over half the respondents thought that SKILLNET had helped them to decide what kind of job they wanted to do, to decide what further education or training to undertake or to communicate better with other people. Under one-third of respondents believed their SKILLNET course had helped them to get a job; over half thought it had not helped them at all in getting a job. Those who had previously acquired at least one O level, however, had a more favourable opinion about SKILLNET in this respect than those with no qualifications or with CSEs only.

Acquiring social skills seems to have been correlated with gender. In gaining self-confidence, two-thirds of women respondents as compared with just over a half of the men thought that SKILLNET had helped them either very much or quite a lot. Similarly, nearly two-thirds of the women thought they communicated better with other people as a result of their SKILLNET course, as compared with half the men. An explanation for this may be that women who are out of work tend not to have social contacts far beyond the domestic sphere; but when they are once more exposed to wider social networks they may noticeably gain in confidence and ease of communication. They may also express positive opinions more readily than men.

Trainees' recommendations

Respondents were invited to mention, in their own words, any ways in which they felt the SKILLNET programme could be improved and nearly two-thirds of the respondents chose to cite some improvement needed. Nearly two-thirds of these people remarked on their wish for changes in the courses, such as a wider coverage of occupational areas, a greater emphasis on particular aspects of course content, more time available for course-work and more opportunities for practical work. One trainee who was concerned with the range of courses on offer wrote this:

> *'I'd like more arts courses, though practically based, such as photographic processing, printing skills, computer graphics, video production, sound engineering. Also, the courses I have enjoyed the most have been those that have been able to dynamically adjust to the abilities and learning power of the students.'*

Over a quarter mentioned a need for enhanced tutorial provision: either more encouragement and individual attention or more 'experienced teachers'. Seventeen per cent would have liked more or better careers advice, opportunities for work experience and general job-related activities. Several thought that information about, and organisation of, courses needed to be improved. A few people wanted more and better equipment or facilities, mentioning the shortage of word-processors or computers available for use by trainees in class time. It should be mentioned in this context that, although the SKILLNET office at Indescon Court (on the Isle of Dogs) offered drop-in facilities for trainees wishing to practise their keyboard skills, very few of those interviewed said they had ever been to the resource centre. Most of those who had been to the centre had done so only once, on a visit arranged by their course tutors. Several people were not aware of its existence.

Respondents were also asked to comment on aspects of SKILLNET provision they thought should be curtailed and only 16 per cent completed this section. Their opinions were varied and either reiterated, in an alternative form, the comments made immediately above, or else seemed to reflect individuals' own preoccupations. Several people, however, remarked that courses had not started on time or had been 'badly organised'.

Reasons for not taking a SKILLNET course

As a way of obtaining some extra information which could help to complete the SKILLNET QSI picture, a short pro forma was sent to all those on the SKILLNET data base who appeared to have enrolled but who did not, in the event, take a course (see appendix [C]). Respondents were asked which course they had enrolled for, why they had decided not to do it and what they were now doing. The response rate, as expected, was extremely low – around 10 per cent overall – so the results cannot be said

to be reliably representative. Again, many were returned by the Post Office because people had moved away. Most people who replied had decided against taking the course because they had meanwhile found employment, suggesting that paid work will take precedence over other considerations, as these two comments illustrate: *'The reason why I didn't take the course was because I needed some money so I'm doing temporary work'; 'I was fortunate to find a job working for a local council and was useful for my financial situation; although it would have been beneficial for me in the long run to take the course.'* A few took up other training instead.

The second-largest group gave personal reasons for not taking the course, such as illness or problems with child care or the fact that the course times conflicted with weekly visits to the unemployment benefit office. (The latter need not have constituted a problem, since signing-on times can be changed in these circumstances.) A few mentioned the lack of qualification associated with the SKILLNET course as a reason for deciding against it and a few mentioned previous negative experiences with SKILLNET: *'The previous course which I did was a great disaster of my life as it was full of theory which was no good without practical experience which they didn't provide.'* A handful said that the course they wanted to do was oversubscribed or cancelled, or that they had turned out to be ineligible to do a SKILLNET course (by reason of age or residential area).

In answer to the question about present occupation, most people said they were now employed, but a substantial number said they were unemployed. A few were engaged in some kind of further education or training. A handful of people felt the courses were not suitable for them, for different reasons. One person (now a full-time BSc student) had this to say:

> *'The courses* (in computing and electronics) *had no foundation for future development of career prospects in the area of computer programming or in industrial electronics and the syllabuses of the courses are not of a high enough standard to conduce to further study at a future date, or to take up employment in the above areas.'*

Another person ('still unemployed') wrote:

> *'There was nothing wrong with the course, but the reason I left was because I thought . . . the chance of getting a job in computing/office work was bleak because I have a hearing/stammering problem.'*

GENERAL COMMENTS

The SKILLNET QSI programme was intended to stimulate a demand for training in people who had presumably dropped out of the education/training system, who were unemployed and who had, on average, few educational qualifications. This meant that recruits had to be attracted by other means than through customary routes into FE. SKILLNET was competitive in one sense with existing training and FE courses, but because unemployment takes people out of circulation, SKILLNET was also competing with something intangible. The clientele was in some ways 'invisible' and therefore needed to be recruited, and supported, by different means from those used to attract people into FE through the more usual routes. Could they be persuaded – not just by initial publicity but by what was delivered – that their decision to take such a course, their time and trouble, was justified? Could they be persuaded that they stood to gain more by doing a SKILLNET course than by not doing it?

The answers to these questions were mixed, as the general comments from respondents show. Trainees were encouraged at the end of the questionnaire to add any further remarks they wished about their experiences of SKILLNET and it is noteworthy that nearly four-fifths of respondents chose to provide such material. Well over one-third had only positive things to say, less than one-third contributed only negative comments and a handful gave mixed feedback. There were somewhat more positive than negative comments overall. Many people considered that their SKILLNET courses had been relevant or helpful to the work they were now doing. Some people reported an increase in confidence and in skills, and sometimes an all-round benefit, to the extent that '*SKILLNET has changed my life.*' In addition to recording personal experiences, many people were keen to stress the socially useful aspects of SKILLNET and were of the opinion that it was helping '*a lot of unemployed people*'. They could see much potential in the programme despite the weaknesses which they themselves had perhaps encountered. Some people commented specifically on the counselling and careers advice offered by the SKILLNET counsellors as something they had found very valuable. A few remarked on the contrast between this and their previous experience of training or education, where such support was absent. SKILLNET's 'open-door' policy, discussed in Chapter 4, involved factors other than entry qualification. Being seen to take trainees' circumstances seriously was a hallmark of SKILLNET provision at its best, through such measures as the daily allowance, the later daily starting times (to avoid the more expensive London Region travel period as well as to accommodate trainees who took their children to school first) and provision of child care, usually crèches.

However, when such provision was absent or broke down, it often resulted in disappointment for trainees: '*I thought SKILLNET was a bit of a let down . . . At the end of the day, I did it for myself.*' Quite a few people said they were not using the skills they had learnt on their courses and felt that SKILLNET had not really helped them. Some claimed that the courses themselves had been badly organised or a waste of time, especially in the light of publicity which had led them to have high expectations. A few of these people made a plea for better information: '*They should keep us in touch, especially when changes are happening. I keep asking the tutors* [if the SKILLNET course is going to continue] *but they say they don't know.*' Some people complained about the tutors and several respondents said that their courses were too brief, casual or superficial. A few remarked on the lack of personal support: '*Sometimes there was no-one in the room; if you got stuck there was nothing you could do*', and several underlined organisational problems and shortages of equipment already mentioned. As one trainee stated: '*The only troubles I found with the course were that there was only six computers and 15 students. Thankfully 10 of them dropped out early. And the fact that the college was not expecting us and they kept changing the days and times.*'

Quite a few respondents seemed glad to have had the chance to express gratitude for the opportunities SKILLNET had given them: '*I found it stimulating, a challenge instead of sitting around,*' related one grateful respondent. While others, by contrast, seemed to be disillusioned and occasionally somewhat bitter as a result of their experiences: '*My first experience of SKILLNET was horrible. They* [the tutors] *treated us like dirt.*'

People also took this opportunity to make requests or suggestions: some enquired about their allowance payments, which had been late arriving, and a few wanted information about certificates of attendance, since they felt these would be useful in seeking employment. Several thought that courses should be open to people over the age of 25, *'so that older people could be given a chance.'*

It sometimes appeared, therefore, as far as the individual trainee was concerned, to be a matter of luck rather than planned provision how far his or her needs could be met through a particular SKILLNET course. An outstanding feature of the SKILLNET QSI programme was its inherent diversity – not only of provision, as explored in Chapter 4, but also, as is clear from the evidence in this chapter, of its trainee clientele. Such a wide range of needs and wishes – whether they were directly articulated or not – confronted staff (administrators as well as tutors) with challenges that were perhaps unexpected but which were nonetheless – at least on occasions – met with a large degree of commitment on both sides.

6

QUALIFICATIONS AND PROSPECTS: ASSESSMENT, ACCREDITATION AND PROGRESSION

INTRODUCTION

During the last decade or so, assessment and accreditation of education and training courses have generated a variety of innovatory practice and related discussion, particularly in the field of open and distance learning. The Open University (1969), the Open Tech (1984) and the Open College (1987) have been promoted, in their different ways, as pioneering an enlargement of educational opportunity and access, and in the case of the Open University interest has been generated by its 'credit-accumulation' policy. With the parallel expansion of vocational training and related qualifications, in both pre- and post-compulsory curricula, the field of assessment and accreditation has become immensely complex. Meanwhile, employers need to be able to identify potential employees from information on record, and various systems of profiling and records of achievement are being developed. Students may, in turn, wish to continue with their studies in another institution or on a different course, and providers of courses need to be able to identify appropriate entry and exit points for them. It is in this general context that the attempts by SKILLNET to monitor trainees' progress and to make appropriate course awards recognisable by employers or providers of FE need to be examined. In this chapter, a background sketch of the present system of assessment and accreditation is given (next section) and the development of SKILLNET assessment procedures is outlined (third section). Evidence from the survey about trainees' acquisition of course credits and/or qualifications is discussed, together with material of a more general nature concerning their opportunities and aspirations for employment or further training (the two sections on 'SKILLNET trainees: their qualifications and expectations' and 'Other indications of progress').

ASSESSMENT, ACCREDITATION AND PROGRESSION: Some general points

The role of qualifications

While qualifications are not the only outcome of assessment and accreditation procedures nor the only factor implicated in issues of progression, they have assumed great importance for both students and employers. This is because qualifications play an increasingly important role in employment prospects, as Payne and Payne (1985) argue. Three factors have contributed, they say, to 'qualification inflation' since the 1970s: the raising of the school-leaving age, the growth of comprehensive education and the introduction of the CSE examination have together resulted in more people acquiring qualifications than in previous years. This has led to employers requiring their employees to have better qualifications for jobs which previously required poor or no qualifications, as Payne and Payne explain:

> '. . . *it must be supposed that, other things being equal, a rise in average qualification levels will also lead to a higher proportion of the unqualified being unemployed. If this coincides with a rapid increase in unemployment . . . the gap between the employment chances of qualified and unqualified young people is likely to widen noticeably.*'

This is supported by a spontaneous observation made by an ex-SKILLNET trainee: '*They* [course tutors] *said something about a job at the end of it. I didn't see that. I think a qualification is important – you don't stand a chance even with the most menial jobs. They* [employers] *can pick and choose.*'

Training, although regarded by many policy-makers as crucial in counteracting the problem of unemployment, may not by itself alleviate an individual's situation. If one adds to the previous argument an observation made by McRae (1987) that '*prior training appears to be disregarded by employers in selecting for vacancies, except when accompanied by a recognised qualification,*' then it might be proposed that one of the major tasks for those offering training courses to unemployed young adults is to provide them with opportunities to gain a qualification that will be recognised by employers. Alongside this immediate requirement must, of course, be placed the long-term job of persuading employers to view their demand for qualifications in a different light, particularly as profiling and criterion-referencing become common practice in educational institutions.

Another important function of recognised qualifications is to give the student an impartial summation of what she has achieved, as another ex-SKILLNET trainee commented: '*Generally I would like students to at least take City and Guilds after their course, where applicable, under the supervision of SKILLNET. This would enable them to know what they have achieved.*'

The main vocational examining and validating bodies in England and Wales are the Business and Technician Education Council (BTEC), City and Guilds of London Institute (C&G) and the Royal Society of Arts (RSA). The C&G and RSA are primarily examining bodies while BTEC's main function is the validation of courses. There are also a number of regional bodies such as the Pitman's Examination Institute and the London Chamber of Commerce and Industry Examining Board (LCCI). As far as SKILLNET is concerned, each of these bodies has been involved with course accreditation, usually according to the current practice of the providing institution (see next section). The majority of qualifications awarded by these bodies have credibility with employers, both because they are thought to be reliable assessments of skills and because they are responsive to the diversities of the market. An established partnership exists between the awarding bodies and the insitutions providing courses (Deloitte Haskins and Sells, 1987 – quoting *Review of Vocational Qualifications in England and Wales* issued by the Working Group on vocational qualifications, 1986). However, providing students or trainees with the opportunity for gaining recognised qualifications may not be such a straightforwarded matter as appears at first sight.

Limitations of the present system

First of all, the present system of vocational qualifications is complicated and the route to gaining qualifications is not always accessible; arrangements for progression and transfer of credit are inadequate (*Review of Vocational Qualifications in England and Wales*, a report by the Working Group, 1986). Another weakness is that '*learning gained outside formal education and training*' is insufficiently recognised; and the limited take-up of vocational qualifications is itself a problem. Overall, the Working Group on vocational qualifications found, according to its 1986 report, that '*there is no effective national system for vocational qualifications*' and recommended that a National Council for Vocational Qualifications be set up. This body if now engaged in the unwieldy project of bringing all post-16 vocational qualifications into a national framework.

'Transferable' skills?

SKILLNET courses are addressed primarily to issues of diagnosis and progression rather than of transferability, on the premise that it is people's basic skills and motivation that need enhancing.

However, one implication of formal accreditation is that skills are worth learning precisely because they can be transferred from one situation to another (the usual example is from the laboratory to the workplace, but the principle is a general one). The discussion of transferability has come increasingly to the fore of training provision because of industry's need for an adaptable and flexible work-force – not only do individual employers seem to require these qualities from their employees but the operation of the labour market itself, no longer characterised by the expectation of stable long-term employment for the majority, also appears to demand these qualities from people seeking work (see Chapter 3). Yet some recent research has thrown doubt on the rigour with which 'transferable' skills have been identified and taught, at least by the MSC. Annett (1987) argues that the idea of a transferable or core skill depends on quite a high level of abstraction. Difficulties may arise, for instance, for instructors working with trainees of limited intellectual abilities. He points out that *'skills which are transferable in name are not necessarily transferable in fact'* and asks for evidence that the list of core skills developed by the MSC – or any other list – *'actually fills a useful function in the context of its intended use'*. He recommends empirical demonstration of the actual transfer value of 'core' skills *'if only to provide some concrete justification of the policy of broad-based training'*.

The report summarises recommendations for the assessment and teaching of both 'core' and 'metacognitive' (learning) skills. However popular the idea of 'transferability' has become with policy-makers, it therefore seems prudent for training providers to approach with a degree of caution the questions it raises for both curricula and accreditation. Indeed, the SKILLNET electronics group viewed the identification of core skills principally in terms of avoiding premature narrow specialisation (see next section).

THE DEVELOPEMENT OF *SKILLNET* ACCREDITATION

In the case of non-standard entry courses like the SKILLNET QSIs, many people have argued that special procedures need to be devised which will monitor and provide a résumé of the progress made by individuals who come from many different starting points. The question of how SKILLNET should assess and record trainees' achievements on short courses based on open or non-standard entry (that is to say, where no previous qualifications were required) has been a continuing topic of discussion for the administrative officers and course tutors.

SKILLNET passports

The idea behind SKILLNET QSI courses as originally conceived – that is, in a version of the Docklands Open College (see Chapter 2) – was that they would operate on the basis of modular progression. This would allow trainees to accumulate SKILLNET credits as they completed each separate module or short course. The idea was still current as Phase 1 came into operation: credits were to be recorded on SKILLNET passports, as advertised on publicity brochures for Phase 1. These were intended to be promoted amongst dockland employers. Phase 1 trainees therefore believed they would in possession of such passports at the end of their courses.

However, the views of the administrative team who succeeded the previous project leaders were that the passport idea was potentially misleading in principle and unworkable in practice. It might, for example, seem to betoken an implicit guarantee of employment which could not be fulfilled. Furthermore, no concise formulation of trainees' achievements had been agreed with course tutors and no completely

reliable mechanism had been set up for ensuring that passports would be filled in first by trainees, passed back to SKILLNET administrators and subsequently returned, completed, to trainees for them to show employers or their next course tutors. In fact, it was discovered that only a quarter of trainees returned their passports to SKILLNET for completion. Letters were accordingly sent out to trainees in June 1987 advising them that the passport system would be discontinued. The reason given was that, instead, courses would be offering nationally recognised qualifications which would be more likely to enhance trainees' chances of finding a job than 'local learning credits'. It was also stated that information about job vacancies with employers already liaising with SKILLNET would be distributed to trainees via a bulletin.

Subsequent accreditation procedures

Some courses were easily fitted into existing national or regional accreditation procedures. Generally speaking, office and keyboard skills and computing courses were examined by RSA, Pitman's or LCCI; and electronic courses by C&G, all of whose awards would be acceptable to potential employers as well as desired by trainees themselves. However, most SKILLNET courses, if taken in isolation, could not cover the amount and depth of work required for such accreditation, given that most trainees would have had little or no previous background in the subject. Some institutions consequently offered follow-on courses and others began to operate their SKILLNET courses on a roll-on roll-off basis over a more prolonged period (see Chapter 4) in order to give trainees a better chance of at least sitting an examination. This appeared to work well, according to reports given by tutors. The outcomes of restructuring SKILLNET QSI courses in this way were either too few or came too late, however, for effects to show clearly in the trainee survey.

As trainees themselves became aware of the problem, some voiced disappointment directly or indirectly. Trainees in one independent training agency all left an office skills course when they realised, after taking a 'mock' RSA examination, that they were unlikely to pass the real thing. The potential for modular progression in the SKILLNET programme has apparently yet to be realised by the majority of trainees. It is possible that the presentation of SKILLNET publicity encouraged an *à la carte* attitude, which was not the most effective way for trainees to approach the objective of working towards recognised qualifications. Talk of needing to structure a 'skills ladder' – progressive acquisition of linked skills – into the programme was in the air at the time of evaluation, and discussions were under way with providing institutions to redesign the next phase of short courses so as to offer a more coherent package to each trainee.

The fact that trainees might well leave their SKILLNET courses with no concrete evidence of what they had achieved was therefore a major disadvantage associated with having SKILLNET courses accredited with recognised validating bodies. SKILLNET counsellors at one stage expressed the view that all SKILLNET trainees should receive a certificate of attendance, which could include a short statement on skills, so that those who left before being able to take an examination would still have something to show for their work. This would seem to be supported by the expressed opinions of some trainees (see section on 'Other indications of progress').

The key aims for SKILLNET of accreditation have now been identified as affirming the achievements of trainees in a tangible way and demystifying both the procedure of gaining certificates and the means of progression from one course to another.

Innovations in accreditation

A few courses, notably those in electronics, had made innovations in course design and accreditation arising from the development of open learning packages. One such was a college-provided course using Macmillan Intek, a commercially produced package with C&G accreditation. This had originally been designed, however, as a distance-learning package primarily for people at work wishing to update their skills. It was not felt wholly suitable for some SKILLNET trainees and one or two tutors reported rewriting course material in order to simplify it as well as providing a lot of tutorial support. Another institution was piloting a City and Guilds certification of Trackdown materials with its electronics trainees on basic and second-stage levels of the Trackdown microprocessor package. There had been some preliminary problems with the content and timing of this, which, however, were expected to be easily resolved. A third institution was looking at the possibility of adopting RSA certification in computer literacy and information technology. Some problems had also been encountered with this, according to the tutor interviewed. It looked, for instance, as if the tutors' work-load would be substantially increased without extra time being allowed for the required assessment and recording of each operation completed by trainees. The advantages to the trainees, however, were that three levels of accreditation – profile, pass or distinction – were offered according to what they achieved during the time available.

A further, more radical, innovation was being mooted at the time of evaluation by the SKILLNET administration and electronics course tutors. It had been suggested that all SKILLNET electronics courses could be accredited by some form of trainee profile which *'would be derived by assessing their ability to perform practical tasks that are common in the field of electronics'*. It was emphasised that these would not take the place of nationally recognised qualifications (as had been the case with the earlier 'passport'). It was planned that certificates should be issued by the providing institution on behalf of SKILLNET, to record tasks 'competently completed' and to perform three further functions:

- to demonstrate a trainee's competence in particular tasks to prospective employers;
- to provide a record of achievement for trainees not sitting an external examination;
- to motivate trainees unlikely to take an external examination.

Subsequent meetings took place to discuss whether such a proposal would receive support and, if so, how courses and profiles might best be designed. Representatives from local industry were invited to comment and contribute. A list of core skills had been devised and the design of trainee assignments and procedures for their assessment had been discussed in some detail by the time of the present evaluation (see Appendix [F]). It was thought that the profiles might be integrated with C&G specifications in order to ensure progression through C&G examinations for trainees who eventually wanted to pursue a recognised qualification.

Profiling versus formal qualifications

Some recent research (Turner, 1987) points out the different functions fulfilled by profiling and formal examinations. Examinations, it was stated, *'act as a sieving device to select a minority of young people for the limited pool of jobs available'*. This appears to be borne out by previously reported evidence from the survey and from interviews with employers (see Chapter 7). Turner argues that profiling has a different objective, that of enabling *'students to record and communicate their achievements and interests'*. But he also points out that *'employers generally regard . . . the ability to be flexible and to get on with other workers, willingness to learn and reliability as very important characteristics'*, which was also borne out in the interviews with employers recruiting ex-SKILLNET trainees.

Open entry

SKILLNET trainees, as we saw in Chapter 5, were a heterogeneous group: some had work experience or prevous training, sometimes relevant to the SKILLNET training they were getting. A large number had, by contrast, a history of unemployment or marginal employment, coupled with a lack of previous qualifications. It is therefore important at this stage to consider the 'open-door' policy of SKILLNET. The fact that there were in theory no entry requirements for QSI courses was a tacit recognition that, for many people, compulsory education had, in some sense and for whatever reasons, failed them. They were becoming unemployable in a labour market where basic qualifications were crucial; what SKILLNET could provide, therefore, was a second chance. This was what might be termed a 'supplementary' model of training in that SKILLNET was attempting, particularly in the field of foundation studies and basic skills, to make up for previous deficiencies. SKILLNET courses were also attempting to meet a quite different need, however: the requirements of a changing labour market, where yesterday's skills and qualifications were not up to the demands of today's jobs and where labour shortages were becoming a problem for employers (see Chapter 3). This might be designated a 'complementary' or 'topping-up' model of training (see Rigg, 1988). The simultaneous deploying of both models of training had implications for trainees' expectations, as well as for syllabuses and tutorial approach. The people arguably in greatest need, and for whom SKILLNET had a strong appeal, were the ones trapped at the bottom of the heap who needed basic education and a high degree of individual support, as well as new skills. The problems this generated for delivery of such a service were discussed in Chapter 4.

SKILLNET TRAINEES: Their qualifications and expectations

This section examines further the evidence from the postal questionnaire sent out to all trainees who attended SKILLNET courses on the first three phases of the QSI programme and the later personal interviews. Trainees' qualifications, both previous to their SKILLNET courses and those received as a result of their SKILLNET courses, constitute one aspect of accreditation and progression. Trainees' destinations after their courses (which are examined in more detail in the following chapter) constitute another. But there are other, less tangible, features which have a bearing on the discussion and these are also explored.

Previous qualifications

In order to get some idea of the educational background of SKILLNET trainees, questionnaire respondents were asked to give the numbers of any CSE, O level or other qualifications they held before taking a SKILLNET course. As noted in Chapter 5, over half had either no qualifications at all or CSEs only (see Figure 5.3).

Qualifications gained

In order to discover how trainees had been credited with course achievements, respondents to the postal questionnaire were asked if they had received either a certificate of attendance or a qualification from their SKILLNET course. Most trainees had received nothing at all, although 18 per cent had been awarded a certificate of attendance and 14 per cent had gained, or expected to gain, at least one qualification. One obviously needs to adjust these figures according to the drop-out rate, since trainees who did not complete the course could hardly expect a qualification. (However, it should be noted that some trainees gave up their courses when they became aware that they were unlikely to get the qualification they desired.) Of those who completed their courses, 30 per cent received a certificate of attendance and about one-fifth gained some kind of qualification. Of the 35 qualifications awarded, 3 were driving licences,

10 were RSA certificates, 9 were C&G certificates, 7 were Pitman's certificates, 2 were Macmillan Intek certificates, 3 were BTEC (ordinary) and 1 was BTEC (higher). Most of the RSA and Pitman's certificates (primarily office/keyboarding skills) were awarded to women, while most of the C&G and both Macmillan Intek certificates (computing, maths or electronics) went to men. Qualifications were evenly distributed across the main ethnic groups; and level of previous qualifications seems to have made no difference to the likelihood of gaining a course qualification. However, the numbers involved were so small that actual differences could have been concealed.

Approximately one-fifth of respondents to the questionnaire said they found the lack of recognised qualification a difficulty:

> *'Well, apparently since doing this course with SKILLNET I haven't achieved anything. Usually I walk into a place for a job and first they'd ask what qualifications have you got. Usually I keep quiet because I can't tell the employer that after the course I didn't receive a certificate, etc. At least we should have something to prove we did this course.'* (Ex-trainee, SKILLNET banking and accounts course, unemployed.)

It is a known fact that some examining/validating bodies are slow in issuing certificates and several of those who had achieved a qualification expressed frustration that proof took so long to arrive:

> *'I finished the course and I was told I had passed the exam but that the certificate wouldn't arrive till June – but employers need to see the certificate.'* (Ex-trainee, SKILLNET computing/office studies course, unemployed.)

> *'I'd like to know about my RSA certificate and my certificate of attendance – they'd be really useful when going for job interviews . . . The SKILLNET course would be useful, if I had some evidence I'd done it.'* (Ex-trainee, SKILLNET computing and banking courses, unemployed.)

It is easy to understand such a point of view, but less easy to suggest what the SKILLNET administration could do about the problem. As is noted in the previous section, the SKILLNET administration has instigated discussion of innovations in accreditation.

In order to supplement the trainees' information on the qualifications on offer via SKILLNET courses, course tutors were asked to complete a form giving details of how many SKILLNET trainees they had entered for examination on the courses they tutored. Information garnered by this strategy did not modify the overall picture, since only a very few tutors were able to respond. One tutor mentioned examinations taken 'outside the college's jurisdiction'; he could not say how many trainees had entered such examinations. Another college tutor reported that she could not complete the form because SKILLNET held all such information. This was not in fact the case and perhaps highlights a need for establishing an agreed system of information-gathering.

Activity after SKILLNET course

In order to obtain evidence about post-SKILLNET progression, respondents were requested to state what occupation they were now engaged in. People could give more than one answer to this question and nearly one-third of respondents chose to do so. Just under 40 per cent were in jobs and about a third of respondents said they were unemployed. (See Chapter 7 for a detailed breakdown of the responses.)

Relevance of qualifications to subsequent activity

These 'before and after' figures show a dramatic decrease in the proportions of unemployed people in the sample from 70 to around 30 per cent. However, so as not to appear to subscribe to the so-called 'black-box' theory of training (where input and output are measured and the difference between them is assumed to be causally related to the innovation adopted), we cross-tabulated the figures on subsequent activity with information on previous qualifications and also with qualifications or certificates gained from SKILLNET courses.

As Figure 6.1 shows, one-quarter of those with no previous qualifications were now in full- or part-time work as compared with over two-fifths of those with CSEs or O levels. For people who were unemployed, the proportions were almost reversed: two-fifths of those with no previous qualifications were unemployed compared with a quarter of those who had O levels. Qualifications acquired by trainees *before* their SKILLNET course would appear to have had a substantial bearing on what they went on to do afterwards.

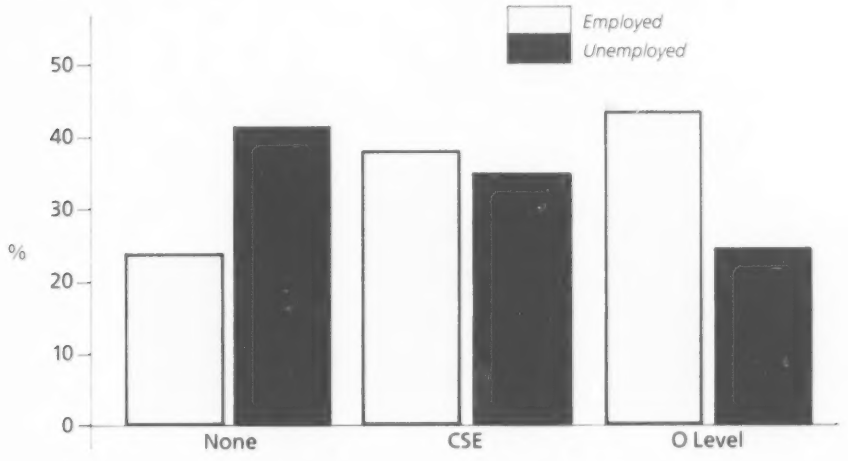


FIGURE 6.1 ***Relationship between previous qualifications and post-SKILLNET activity (employment/unemployment).***
Base: 272 respondents.

Qualifications gained on SKILLNET courses, by contrast, appear to have had no effect on subsequent activity, although the relevant figures may be too small to reveal actual differences.

OTHER INDICATIONS OF PROGRESSION

'Progression' is a concept difficult to discuss solely in quantitative terms. Narrowly interpreted, it can refer simply to the transfer, and transferability, of credits accumulated by a student or trainee, as he or she undertakes a linked series of courses. One would be looking for evidence to show (or dispute) that the courses taken and the credits conferred enabled the trainee to progress through a rational and systematic process of knowledge and/or skills acquisition; and to move eventaully into a chosen occupation. There are wider interpretations of the term, however, with just as much importance for the individual. These might include notions of personal fulfilment and development.

Progression within SKILLNET

As noted in Chapter 5, most trainees have not undertaken more than one SKILLNET course, and this is prima-facie evidence that progression in the stricter sense is not yet established within the SKILLNET QSI programme as far as most trainees are concerned. Under one-fifth had taken two courses and a very few had taken three or more. Eleven people had taken combinations of computing and office/keyboard skills courses

and 6 had done both computing and business studies. Another dozen had taken a driving course (discontinued after Phase 1) in addition to other more typical SKILLNET courses. This might suggest they had been initially attracted by the driving – a very popular option when it was offered – and then stayed with SKILLNET to do something else afterwards. Several people took more than one course in office/keyboard skills, eletronics, computing and building respectively, though it is not known from the data whether these were continuation courses, repeats of uncompleted courses or similar courses in different institutions. The electronics courses were probably the most likely to be continuation courses. At least one establishment offered electronics courses at three levels on a roll-on, roll-off basis and it seemed, from discussion with the tutor, that several trainees had taken advantage of these offerings on each phase.

Most of the courses, as originally conceived, could not cover syllabuses for recognised qualifications if taken singly, especially given the fact that many trainees needed a lot of tutorial support to do the work. This would partly explain why the majority of trainees, even when they attended regularly and finished the course, were not entered for an examination and did not get a qualification.

Use of skills learnt on SKILLNET

As another pointer to issues of progression, trainees who were interviewed in person were asked to say whether they were now using the skills they had learnt on their SKILLNET courses. Just under half of those who were in full- or part-time jobs said they were using those skills either very much or quite a lot. The rest said they were not using those skills very much or even at all. None of those who were not in paid work said they were using the skills from their courses.

Plans for the future

However, present activity provides only a snapshot picture; evidence about people's plans for the future was also sought. The majority of interviewees said they wanted to get a job – which they usually specified – or to change their present job. Almost as many said they wanted to obtain further education or training, usually with a particular career in mind, and several said they wanted to do another SKILLNET course. Quite a few were continuing with their studies, or hoping to do so, in ways which built on their previous SKILLNET course. A handful wanted to be trained in the jobs they were already doing in order to get promotion, or to leave in order to find 'more scope'. Only a few people said they did not know, or seemed uncertain of, their prospects. One interviewee said, '*If I got a job, I'd take it*,' and another thought she would '*plod along until another vacancy occurs – but with the cut backs it could be difficult.*' Only two people in the survey and one interviewee mentioned self-employment: people did not therefore appear to see themselves as forerunners in an 'enterprise culture'. It would have been difficult for the researcher to assess whether people's individual aspirations were realistic, although plans were generally couched in modest and thoughtful terms. Reference should be made, however, to Church's (1987) discovery that, at least in London's dockland, people's aspirations are changed by what is happening around them:

> '*. . . although the local labour market is very depressed, the City and the West End of London represent relatively buoyant labour markets compared to other urban areas and the perceived, but not necessarily real, job opportunities in these areas also maintain . . . job aspirations.*'

Personal fulfilment

Evidence about personal fulfilment and development is hard to obtain from one-off interviews, let alone from a short postal questionnaire. These provide, however, some illuminative material, which hinted at the

range of trainees' feelings and opinion about their lives and how their SKILLNET courses fitted in with that general pattern. A brief selection of such comments follows:

> *'I feel great about what I am doing and I love it. Although I am not using my skill gained on the SKILLNET course I enjoyed doing it and it was well worth while.'* (Nursing auxiliary.)
>
> *'I am still out of work but I did find the SKILLNET course useful . . . I would like to thank everyone at SKILLNET for the opportunity of doing the course, especially the counsellors.'* (Unemployed.)
>
> *'I can't tell you anything because I didn't learn much.'* (Unemployed.)
>
> *'I decided to go back to school to get some qualifications – I couldn't stand another job like Tesco's* [temporary cashier]. *I'm very satisfied with what I'm doing – I need to get some more O levels and finish my A levels, then I want to go to university.'* (Student.)
>
> *'I was happy during the course and it gave me understanding and experience: I'd like to work in computing or banking.'* (Unemployed.)
>
> *'I'm doing nothing now. I feel very bored and lazy without a job.'* (Unemployed.)
>
> *'I'm not satisfied, I feel useless. I feel I'm only there for them* [the children].' (Unemployed, mother.)
>
> *'I'm very bored. Being a housewife just doesn't suit me. I feel like I'm in prison. I've got nothing to look forward to.'* (Unemployed, mother.)
>
> *'SKILLNET has helped me a lot, because it has given me both ideas about what I could do and the skills to do them. I enjoyed the courses: I'm still using the skills and the course materials. I'm studying at home.'* (Trainee in word-processing.)
>
> *'After the SKILLNET course, I started to get things together.'* (Self-employed, informal economy.)

It is therefore clear that, for some people, SKILLNET *'was like a door opening'* (in the words of one ex-trainee), while for other people either that door never opened fully or different ones were shut in their face. Strikingly, many mothers who had made efforts to attend courses (with or without the help of on-site child care facilities) found themselves afterwards back in the same apparently dead-end situation as before. Without other, deeper changes in social structures, SKILLNET was not in a position noticeably to improve their immediate opportunities for employment or further education, though it had undoubtedly often provided a useful and welcome break in their lives. The achievement of qualifications was for some people a secondary consideration, in that what SKILLNET provided was a chance to do something new and challenging in a supportive environment. For others, who had perhaps already gained qualifications while at school and had particular careers in mind, further training was perceived to be of use to them primarily for the enhanced employment opportunities they expected from it. To these people, qualifications were, probably justifiably, much more important. There is, perhaps, some discernible contrast between those for whom the *process* of doing a SKILLNET course was valuable in itself and those for whom the *product* or outcome would normally take precedence.

Clearly, employers' views and practices concerning qualifications are central to the enlargement or otherwise of trainees' chances. It is arguably, therefore, part of SKILLNET's function to make the forms of accreditation which are awarded on SKILLNET courses acceptable to employers, rather than simply awarding qualifications which are already acceptable in the eyes of employers.

7

TRAINEES' DESTINATIONS: DELIVERY INTO JOBS

INTRODUCTION

This chapter looks at the destinations of SKILLNET trainees after they had left or finished their courses. 'Destinations' are discussed primarily in terms of employment, on the assumptions: first, that policy-makers see training both as enhancing people's job opportunities and as helping to provide the kind of work-force needed by employers; and, secondly, that paid work is what most trainees would be looking for. However, it is clear from the discussion in Chapter 3 that differing evidence on employment prospects in London's dockland areas, as well as differing ways of interpreting the same evidence, call into question what jobs – both numerically speaking and with what kind of prospects – are actually available for young unemployed people.

This chapter looks at evidence on destinations derived from the postal survey and from personal interviews with ex-SKILLNET trainees (next section). A discussion of SKILLNET's job-placement activities is presented (third section); and evidence from interviews conducted with a sample of docklands employers, all new to the area since redevelopment began, is explored (section on 'Employers and their needs'). This chapter reverses the pattern of the previous two, by examining the survey data first and providing a general discussion of the context afterwards, as a way of bringing together the major issues affecting people's post-training destinations (final section: 'Some underlying issues'). Chapter 3 may be taken as the background to the survey data presented in the present chapter.

TRAINEES AND THEIR DESTINATIONS

As part of the evaluation, evidence was sought about where trainees went after their SKILLNET courses, and this was compared with information about what they were doing beforehand and about their personal backgrounds. Figures on destinations by themselves do not prove a great deal. The interaction of various factors in determining the net effect of taking a SKILLNET course on the prospects of any individual trainee (in either the short or the long term) is far too complex to be teased out of the present survey. However, some interesting findings are available (which may themselves suggest directions for further research).

Destinations of respondents

In order to obtain evidence about destinations, respondents were asked what occupation(s) they were now engaged in. One may assume that being in paid work (either full- or part-time) and being unemployed would be perceived by respondents as mutually exclusive. As Figure 7.1 shows, 38 per cent of respondents were in full- or part-time work after their SKILLNET course, as distinct from 10 per cent who were in employment before SKILLNET. About one-third of respondents were now unemployed, compared with around 70 per cent before SKILLNET. Just under one-third were engaged in education or training, including SKILLNET courses. This figure compares with 18 per cent who were studying or training before embarking on SKILLNET.

The proportion who were at home with children stayed the same, while participation in government-sponsored schemes had risen from 5 per cent (pre-course) to 10 per cent (post-course). Around 10 per cent noted some other occupation, such as 'looking for work' or 'hoping to undertake further training'. Only two people mentioned starting their own business.

An analysis was undertaken in order to establish whether other prior factors in people's experience (as reported in the questionnaire) might be implicated in the decrease in unemployment figures. We examined

people's subsequent activity in the light of their gender, their ethnicity, their previous qualifications, the qualifications they gained on their SKILLNET courses and whether or not they had dropped out of their courses before completing them.

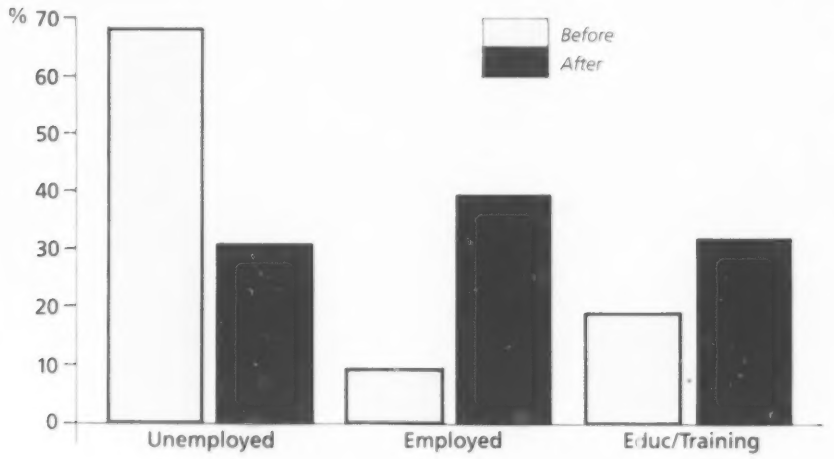


FIGURE 7.1 ***Key activities before and after SKILLNET.***
Base: 266 respondents.

Gender

Proportionately more men than women were in full-time work or involved in further training or education (though more women happened to be still doing a SKILLNET course). Proportionately more women – though only slightly – were working part-time. More women were on the Job Training Scheme, while more men were working on the Community Programme. The overwhelming majority of those at home with children were women. Men and women were equally likely, however, to be unemployed. Since, according to local unemployment rates (given in Chapter 5), men and women have broadly similar chances of being unemployed, this would suggest that the impact of SKILLNET courses has been fairly evenly distributed between the sexes.

Ethnicity

Figure 7.2 illustrates the key post-course activities of people in different ethnic groups and shows that they were more or less equally likely to avoid unemployment. On the other hand, the intervention of SKILLNET cannot be said to have altered in a major way the level of disadvantage to ethnic minorities. One should note the very small proportion of Black Africans in employment *post* SKILLNET; they were more likely to be engaged in education/training than to be employed. This finding reflects cultural patterns also observed, for instance, in ILEA Careers Service figures given for school-leavers' planned destinations in 1987. A number of Black Africans come to the UK specifically for education and/or training. But it may equally well indicate that training was chosen in preference to remaining unemployed. Black Afro-Caribbeans were the next group least likely to be employed *post* SKILLNET.

The differences which emerged in the proportions of people from different ethnic groups who were employed after taking a SKILLNET course perhaps hint at the reality of racial discrimination in employment for many black people (see Brown, 1984).

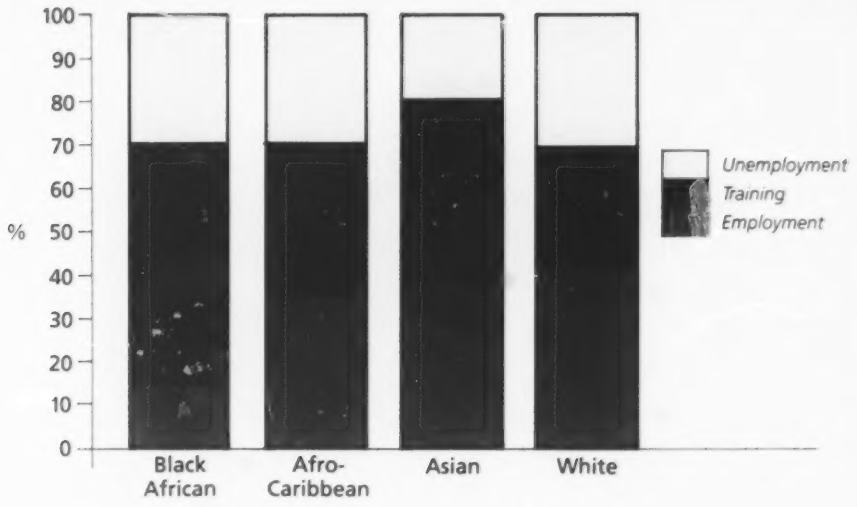


FIGURE 7.2 ***Key activities of different ethnic groups post SKILLNET.***
Base: 241 respondents.

Qualifications before and after SKILLNET

Qualifications gained before SKILLNET courses seemed to have some bearing on whether people found employment after their courses, with those who were better qualified standing a higher chance of doing so than those with poor qualifications. Qualifications gained as a result of SKILLNET courses, however, made no observable difference. The findings and their implications are discussed more fully in Chapter 6.

Drop-out

Whether people dropped out of a course before completing it seems to have made no difference to whether they were doing paid work afterwards. However, just under a quarter of those who dropped out said they did so because they found work.

Types of work and job satisfaction

In order to obtain a fuller picture of what kind of work people were doing, trainees who were interviewed were asked to say what they were doing now. If they were in work, they were asked where they were working and what kind of job it was; and to what extent they were using the skills they had learnt on their course. Interviewees were also asked how satisfied they were with what they were doing and what they planned to do next. Three-quarters of those interviewed (excluding those interviewed in their course groups) had applied for jobs; those who had not were still in training or education. People interviewed in their SKILLNET course groups had not yet, on the whole, got round to applying for jobs. About half the people who had finished their SKILLNET course were now in full- or part-time work. About one-quarter said they were unemployed; half of these people were women with young children. All bar one, however, had applied for jobs. Over a quarter were involved in other training or educational courses, and some of them were doing this as well as working. A handful were participating in government-sponsored schemes. In other words, the proportions of interviewees engaged in different activities were roughly comparable to findings from the survey, save that there was a somewhat higher proportion of interviewees who had jobs. As described in Chapter 6, just under half of those who were in full- or part-time jobs said they were using those skills either very much or quite a lot; the rest said they were not using those skills very much or even at all. None of those who were not in paid work said they were using the skills from their courses.

Some people were quite happy with what they were doing – people who had undertaken further study were particularly likely to express satisfaction and to perceive a progression route between what they were doing now and a long-term career plan. Reactions of people in work to the question of whether they were satisfied with what they were doing varied widely. Several were satisfied both in the present and with their prospects: *'I'm satisfied with the job – I'm training to become a manager'* (Supervisor, high street drug store); *'I'm very satisfied; I want to stay where I am'* (Sales support assistant, newspaper company); *'I'm very happy – I want to do further training in computers'* (Field engineer, computer firm).

Some were satisfied on the whole but could think of things they wanted to change, as these cases illustrate: *'I suppose I'm satisfied – but I'd like to go further'* (Self-employed, informal economy); *'I like talking to people, meeting and greeting them. I like working here, I get on well with my colleagues. The only thing I'm not happy with is the pay!'* (Receptionist/telephonist, training agency); *'I'm quite settled, but I don't want to stay in mechanics all my life'* (Assistant MOT tester, garage); *'I'm waiting for promotion; I want to carry on progressing here'* (Clerical assistant, DHSS branch).

As might be expected, some people were not very impressed with the jobs they had: *'It gets a bit boring – I'm a general dogsbody really'* (typist, school of art); *'I'm putting up with it. I don't intend to be stuck as a secretary'* (Junior clerk, newspaper company). One or two felt they had been misled by employers about their prospects, as this detailed quote shows:

> *'They gave me this big spiel at the interview about how successful they were, opportunities for going far, that sort of thing. But it hasn't worked out like that for me. I would like to be using the skills I learnt more – the job was supposed to be varied. There's no real training schedule, but they gave me more spiel when I complained. They've promised me to go on courses, but it's never happened. Pay's a part of it as well.'* (Workshop assistant, truck parts and accessories firm.)

Those least satisfied with what they were doing were people who had not got jobs. Sometimes they had previous work experience with which to compare their present situation, particularly if they were women with young children:

> *'I'm very bored. Being a housewife just doesn't suit me. I've got nothing to look forward to. Being a packer in a cheese factory sounds like a crappy job, but there were 8 or 9 of us there and we had a good laugh. I got made redundant when there wasn't enough work to go round.'* (Unemployed mother, ex-packer and clerical assistant.)
>
> *'I enjoy having the children but I do feel cut off and isolated. It's the conversation flow, the mixing with people. I want a job for the social aspects, but also financially.'* (Unemployed mother, ex-cosmetics agency.)
>
> *'I feel useless. I'm only there for the children. I'd like a job, just to get out. It would have to be well-paid – I haven't had a holiday for five years.'* (Unemployed mother, ex-typist and schools cook.)

Some people made reference to the discouraging aspects of job-hunting. It was a common complaint that no notification of rejection was given and this added to people's feelings of disappointment:

> *'I'm not really satisfied. I'm looking for a full-time job in an office or a shop. Since I left Smith's, I've had 6 or 7 interviews, but they never let me know. I feel they don't care.'* (Unemployed woman.)

'I've applied for about 10 jobs since the course; some of them contacted me afterwards, some didn't. They don't give you reasons for not being selected.' (Unemployed woman.)

'I passed the aptitude test, but then I just got a letter. It didn't say why I hadn't got the job.' (Unemployed woman.)

One man alluded to the practice of 'discriminatory gatekeeping' among employers:

'I'm doing nothing now. I feel bored and lazy without a job. I feel very angry that people have said "We'll let you know" and then don't. A couple of times, people at reception have said "We don't want Asians."' (Unemployed man.)

All these people, however, were planning to go on seeking work and/or further training: *'I'll maybe apply again for the same kind of job. I'd like to do a course to better myself'*. Women with children were evidently constrained by their child-care responsibilities, though they expressed this in different ways: for example, *'I want a part-time job. I'm not career-minded now I've got the children'*; compared with, *'I know what I want to do, but it's hard to do it because of the children.'* Child-care responsibilities may lead to women seeking different work-patterns: one person had combined two part-time jobs for a period while her child was an infant, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. Another woman said that she had applied for night-work with a major bank as she could not work during the day.

Implications of the findings

The above findings are interesting in themselves, suggesting that gender and ethnicity affected post-SKILLNET destinations to some extent while previous qualifications provided stronger predictors. The survey cannot show, however, what proportion of which people would have got jobs had they not taken a SKILLNET course. A rough measure may be taken from the overall figures quoted in Chapter 5, according to which unemployed people in the dockland area had, on average, just over a 1-in-3 chance of ceasing to be unemployed. This would suggest that doing a SKILLNET course did not noticeably increase people's chances of becoming employed compared with any other measures unemployed people are likely to take. However, as noted in Chapter 3, unemployment is a flow rather than a stock: people may be in and out of work over a period of time, and a snapshot picture does not adequately show the *pattern* of people's working lives.

Although it cannot be taken as directly supporting the present findings, Church's (1987) work is interesting in this context. With regard to the general effects of training on young people in one dockland area, Church says that *'It is quite apparent that national training initiatives and certain more local efforts, such as the Job Club, seemed to have had little effect on the labour market experiences or for that matter the job search methods of these young people.'* He also observes that it is very difficult to say what distinguishes poorly qualified people who find work relatively easily from those who do not. Level of qualification was not found to be a reliable guide by itself to ease and regularity of finding employment. This seems to indicate a need for policy-makers involved in training provision, such as the SKILLNET programme, to monitor as closely as possible the relationship between trainees' previous qualifications, the training they undertake, their employment histories and how they experience all of these, in order to establish more firmly the salient factors in these complex processes.

It may be that an issue for curriculum provision is embedded in amongst such indeterminate data. SKILLNET QSI courses aimed to provide vocational skills: the sensitive task of confidence-building was not specified as a course component, though some tutors certainly viewed it as an integral part of their job. Perhaps a foregrounding of the need for self-confidence and of curricular approaches to this could be encouraged by SKILLNET, together with appropriate monitoring of outcomes.

SKILLNET'S JOB-PLACEMENT ACTIVITY

Aspects of the work

The work of the SKILLNET counselling team in helping to place people in jobs – and the problems that emerged from this work – have been referred to in Chapter 4, but it is worth mentioning again the range of responsibilities they undertook. This was in addition to their work of recruiting trainees for courses, liaising with course tutors on all aspects of curricula and supporting trainees on courses. Job-placement was clearly a complex undertaking in itself. Trainees were scattered in institutions over a large geographical area; those most likely to be actively looking for jobs had left their courses and had to be contacted at home. Moreover, the job market, in an area of redevelopment, was continually changing. SKILLNET was required to be both responsive to, and interventionist in, a volatile situation (which one employer described as '*a complete hotchpotch*'). The work carried out by the team included giving individual help to trainees in preparing CVs and writing letters of application. Counsellors received notifications of job vacancies from local employers and co-ordinated these into a bulletin which was sent out to trainees.

Difficulties with the work

There were increasing difficulties associated with SKILLNET's placement activity, some of a practical and some of a more fundamental nature. Counsellors did not have access, for example, to mail merge and address label functions from the data base. They had to address envelopes by hand, which made the distribution of the bulletin tedious and slow. Sometimes vacancies were already filled by the time trainees were notified. Bulletins were subsequently sent out to course tutors instead, but this meant that information did not always reach the trainees who might have benefited from it. Trainees who approached counsellors for help would be given careers guidance (and many trainees who responded to the questionnaire remarked particularly on the general helpfulness of the counselling team); but these tended to be self-selected people. Counsellors felt on the one hand that they should be doing follow-up and support work as part of their overall responsibility to trainees; but on the other that if they were to attempt to do it for everyone, the work-load would be quite impossible. The arguments for and against a distinct employment-agency function in SKILLNET are noted in Chapter 4. A major difficulty would seem to be that, while SKILLNET functioned as a network in terms of training provision, it was assumed to operate as a delivery system as regards placement. People tended to perceive SKILLNET's credibility – or to believe that others would do so – by its capacity to deliver trainees into employment. This amounts to a contradiction which, particularly in view of the uncertain employment prospects in the dockland areas, needs to be disentangled. SKILLNET may otherwise be adversely judged on the basis of a function it may not realistically be able to fulfil.

Recruitment of trainees through the SKILLNET service

SKILLNET counsellors provided a list of trainees who had been recruited for jobs in the Docklands area through SKILLNET, together with a list of contacts at the establishments. This amounted to 11 employees at 6 establishments. Of these, 1 trainee was reported to have found the job for herself and 2 were taken on after a three-week placement period, through provision that was distinct from the QSI programme. Of the remaining 4 employers, all of whom were visited, SKILLNET itself was the largest recruiter, with 5 of the 11 ex-trainees working at its headquarters. Furthermore, at one of these interviews, it emerged that the employee in question, although she had heard of SKILLNET, had not done a SKILLNET course. In terms of the evaluation, therefore, evidence from employers about SKILLNET trainees is very limited; but some useful pointers emerged which could at least form the basis for further investigation.

EMPLOYERS AND THEIR NEEDS

The role of qualifications

The personnel officer in one organisation granted unsolicited access to job applicants' files, from which it emerged that 13 SKILLNET trainees had applied for a post which was in the field of computer administration. Of these, 3 were interviewed. Of the candidates not even called for interview, most had O levels and 3 had A levels; most also had other certificates such as RSA or City and Guilds and most had some kind of work experience. As the successful candidate had only four O levels – and indeed the interviewer placed great importance on other qualities, such as enthusiasm and initiative – no hard conclusions can be drawn from this evidence. Nonetheless the unsuccessful candidates' level of qualifications raises questions about the prospects of being called for interview for those trainees who have few or no qualifications.

The role of training

The staff member to whom this same employee was directly responsible ventured the opinion that no course could have provided appropriate training for this job. On the other hand, the organisation was one where, according to the personnel officer, very little staff development and training had so far been possible because of the extended rapid growth period of the organisation. This was slowly beginning to change, though it was still practice to take on people who could 'get on with the job'. In another case, although the interviewee agreed that familiarity with data input and word-processing would be useful, he could not imagine that any external courses would be specifically suitable for jobs here; specialised training would be required. (Negotiation was already under way for collaboration with SKILLNET in providing such training.)

The interviewee in a third establishment with some experience of liaising with SKILLNET remarked that small companies *'can't afford training, either in time or in money'*, and that included day-release. He said he wanted his recruits (those who would be likely to come via SKILLNET) to have a basic applicable electronics knowledge and to have state-of-the-art wiring and soldering skills. College courses were relevant content-wise but lacked attention to detail, and greater meticulousness was required in practical welding procedures. He said he appreciated the problems of trying to give a broad knowledge across many fields, especially in short courses; but he often found that applicants had insufficient skills and familiarity with tools and procedures. The personnel officer in a fourth establishment said that staff training was given in whatever areas individual staff requested.

In other words, none of the firms where interviews were conducted appeared to have a policy allowing for systematic staff training. At the

same time interviewees seemed to be saying that courses taken prior to employment would not provide sufficiently specific experience and skills for the job. If we remind ourselves that the problem SKILLNET was set up to address was local people's lack of skills and qualifications required by employers, the evidence from this straw poll hints at an alarming double-bind for those people, which could – if replicated on a large scale in other firms – amount to effective discrimination.

Employers' requirements for personal qualities in recruits

One personnel officer remarked that, although there were not many junior clerical posts available in the organisation, it was difficult to fill them because of the poor standard of written communication by applicants. Too many people, this person thought, were encouraged to go in for office-type work because of its relative status. She felt they were not suitable for the demands of office work and would do much better to go into the retail or catering trades, which could provide jobs in the area. She was looking for literacy, tidiness of presentation and a certain degree of self-confidence.

Another employer stressed his requirements for qualities such as precise timekeeping, smart appearance, adaptability to the ethos of the firm, no '*extremes*' and a willingness to travel in from some distance. He reported that there had been some disagreement with local authority representatives, during discussions on the employment of local people, about the definition of the word 'local'. Originality of thought, ability to take responsibility and adaptability to the demands of the job were mentioned by this employer as qualities they would be looking for, though they doubted whether they could afford to pay for them. The interviewee expressed a concern that SKILLNET was not geared up for immediate response to employers' requests, but reflected that, since SKILLNET was dealing with '*self-motivated*' people, they would in any case '*get on their bikes*'. Those were the kind of people they wanted to recruit from.

The interviewee in a third establishment remarked on the importance of '*realistic aspirations*'; he felt that '*being on the dole skews people's expectations of what work involves – I'm offering them hard work for the same amount of money they could get doing nothing.*' Recruits had to understand what was involved in the job at the beginning: at least two years had to be spent working at the basic level of '*man in the van*', '*but if you're good, you rise quickly*'. He said that warning recruits of these requirements had the effect of preventing high turnover, as it '*scared off*' those who were not willing to comply. However, both ex-SKILLNET trainees previously recruited had left. Both seemed, according to the interviewee, to have had personal problems which became intractable.

The fourth person interviewed felt that the major requirement for employees was to work well under pressure in what she described as an often noisy and chaotic atmosphere. Use of new office technology was required. There was no room for '*timid*' people. Applications from some trainees had been poor, with both written and spoken English problems. The interviewee stressed the need for 'after-care' of SKILLNET trainees – advice on punctuality, on how to dress, how to conduct an interview and so forth. Some applicants thought the interview was an induction: '*they were mortified to know that they were not the only ones!*' The interviewee also thought that some SKILLNET courses presently offered were too '*high-tech*'. This was a disadvantage, partly because there were not enough jobs in those areas and partly because some trainees '*can't tackle those levels*'. More basic skills courses would be better, in such areas as welding, car maintenance and pub catering. The interviewee was very satisfied, however, with the SKILLNET recruitment she had undertaken.

The tenor of some of these comments suggests that there is work to be done in alerting employers to the wastage rates of practices they may take for granted. Just as improvements need to be made regarding the qualifications, motivation and self-confidence of individuals, so is there a need to address the sometimes discriminatory or self-contradictory implications of employers' practices, to reduce the consequent wastage to themselves and to the community.

Profiles

Opinions about profiles – statements based on individuals' records of achievement – were briefly canvassed; with such a small sample, the evidence is hardly conclusive. Profiling as an alternative approach to assessment and accreditation, while familiar to educationists, has not penetrated far into employers' modes of recruitment. There was guarded approval for an authenticated résumé of skills and experience, as long as the specific course content was known. Doubt was expressed over how useful this would be to a potential employer compared with the normal CV. Skills required for particular jobs were said to be very specific, as distinct from general skills learnt on computer literacy courses, for example. This could be an area for detailed input and negotiation between course providers, employers and SKILLNET.

SOME UNDERLYING ISSUES

This section provides a few pointers to some major areas affecting training and employment prospects, which form the context within which SKILLNET trainees are seeking and getting jobs.

Attitudes to training

Although policy-makers may view training as a rational method of enhancing people's employment opportunities in times or areas of high unemployment, the people themselves are less likely to make such a connection. Ashton and Maguire's study (undated), referred to in Chapter 3, demonstrated that '*Young adults are only likely to consider undertaking training... if they can see a realistic chance of a "payoff" in terms of increased job opportunities.*' Research undertaken by Church (1987), on the other hand, indicates a contrasting process at work:

> '*...forty per cent of those currently unemployed had not thought of doing any further training. It is not surprising that respondents had this negative attitude to training... it seemed that the lower quartile particularly were aware that members of their own peer group with few qualifications were obtaining jobs. So there was some logic in hoping to obtain work as well without going on a training course.*'

It seems therefore that the decision to take a training course may be influenced by factors not readily accessible to policy-makers, not least of which are the individual's perceptions of what is happening around him.

'Pay-offs' from training are placed further in doubt in considering arguments put forward by commentators on 'computer literacy' (see, for example, Webster and Robins, 1987). They identify a current emphasis on the necessity of computer literacy for securing employment: '*We are told over and over again that the jobs of the future will demand highly qualified people. But... the evidence is that the overwhelming majority* [of new areas of employment] *will be found in... "labour intensive industries which are not so much low tech as no tech."*' They go on to say that the assumption behind computer literacy initiatives is that '*high-tech leads to high skill demands from employees*' but the evidence on technological change is that, on the contrary, it has '*resulted in operatives having next to no skill*'. The reason for this, according to the authors, is that '*modern industry requires so little of its operatives*' and it is this that

causes low levels of skill, not the inabilities of the work-force. It might also be noted that the more developed computers and word-processors become, the less system-specific training they require in order to operate them. Perhaps the source of computer mystique is actually a manufactured mystification which is rather quickly disappearing, whereas the abiding requirement is for variations on the skills traditionally associated with typing.

For several of SKILLNET's clientele, this picture may require some adjusting. For them, even the basic skills and machine-familiarity need boosting, for without such resources they are likely to be debarred from participating in modern industry. But, while it is SKILLNET's policy to use machines as a means to an end – for example, to build up people's literacy skills by means of word-processing packages – rather than to offer to train them to high levels of technical skill, it is nonetheless questionable whether trainees on the one hand and employers on the other similarly entertain these relatively low levels of expectation when contemplating computer or word-processing courses. The identification of 'computing' with 'high-level skill' perhaps needs to be dislodged.

Employment versus unemployment

The attitudes to training described above arise presumably because what people are primarily interested in, although the way may be circuitous, is finding employment: *'In the short-term, such young people need counselling about seeking and finding work...They need advice about training and upgrading their skills. In the long-term, however, they need stable jobs.'* (White, 1987). It is usually argued – and such evidence as the current evaluation provides supports this – that unemployed people would rather be at work than not; and that they are justified in this aspiration, not least because of the need for an income. Findings from other studies include such statements as: *'They would rather do any sort of job than be unemployed'* (Church, 1987) and *'For these young people...the only solutions which would be more than palliative are labour market solutions...Without employment, these young people... don't have a chance.'* (White, 1987.)

Reservations have been expressed by some commentators which would qualify, though not refute, this point of view on the grounds that although employment is used as the bench-mark by which to judge the experience of unemployment, many jobs too have unsatisfactory conditions and consequences associated with them. Church (1987), drawing on earlier research, argues for instance that the often-heard demand from employers, employers' organisations and policy-makers for 'flexibility and adaptability' is tantamount to a demand for unskilled labour; and corresponds *'with a major re-organisation of employment strategies by large firms, collapsed round a core group of permanent employees and with a large periphery on "hire and fire" and short-term contracts, agency "temps", outsources, self-employed and sub-contractors that can be expanded or contracted according to demand.'*

The pattern of employment this generates for some people may be highly unsatisfactory, whilst not landing them in permanent unemployment:

> *'The fact that this lower quartile have been able to maintain their aspirations and that the London docklands does not seem to have a permanently unemployed sub-class of young people does not mean that youth unemployment is any less of a problem. At any one time a large number of young people are unemployed in this area and though many are able to find work again, the jobs they are finding are not providing them with the stable employment that the vast majority of the sample claimed to be a desirable goal in their lives.'* (Church, 1987.)

Definitions of 'local'

Criticism (implicit or explicit) is often levelled at assumptions thought to be made by local unemployed people, which act as a constraint on their aspirations and employability. Such criticism depends, of course, on other sets of assumptions; an example of these is the view voiced by employers and employment agencies that people interpret 'local' narrowly, being unwilling to travel very far to work and thus limiting their own opportunities. There is some evidence that people in London's East End do not travel as far as some others. One might want to argue, though, that the context for this ought to take account of such factors as:

- the transport system (its quality, cost and convenience)
- job security
- allowances made by employers for travel costs and/or time
- hours worked (long or unsocial)

If any or all of these factors are unfavourable, they may well militate against people making the sort of commitment to the job which employers would like. Travel may in practice be a sizeable part of the employee's commitment, especially when further travel factors are taken into account, such as journeys to school and/or child-minder before and after the work journey. In the case of the East End, cultural traditions may also play a part. Professional jobs are more likely to provide offsetting benefits, such as flexible working hours, interest-free loans on season tickets or company cars.

Contract compliance

Contract compliance has generated much discussion, particularly with regard to London's dockland, where high local unemployment rates are accompanied by acute labour-and-skills shortages in particular occupational areas. One definition of contract compliance requires that contractors give preference in recruitment practices to local people; arguments against this being enforced on contractors revolve primarily around the assertion that local people may not have the requisite skills for the jobs. Internal conflict has been reported (Burney, 1988) within national government policy over contract compliance; the Department of Trade and Industry is reported as accepting that the inner city task forces should ensure that contractors recruit local labour in areas with high ethnic minority populations, whereas the Department of the Environment has 'tried to resist' such a commitment. This is clearly an argument with some bearing on the employment prospects of ex-SKILLNET trainees.

Each of the above-mentioned issues, different in kind and level of complexity – and here only alluded to in the most cursory way – is implicated in how any particular individual may fare in embarking on training with a view to getting a job. As Church's (1987) research in particular shows, a far more rigorous 'tracking' over a period of time of the individuals in question is required in order to establish with any degree of certainty what the influential personal, social and economic factors are in their training and job history; and in their hopes, plans and chances for the future. The effect of SKILLNET courses on people's employment patterns, therefore, is hard to assess.

What is more certain, however, is that a SKILLNET course is only one of a number of factors with the potential to influence an individual's chances. While employment is a justifiable goal of training as far as the individual is concerned, the success of SKILLNET QSI should not be seen to rest on the statistics for delivery into employment, since this would suggest a more reliably causal connection between training and employment than is the case on the evidence available. In particular, the majority of jobs for which SKILLNET may fairly be said to provide training are still in the notional category.

8

DISCUSSION: IMPLICATIONS OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS AND THEIR POLICY MESSAGES

INTRODUCTION

This final chapter is intended more to offer an overview of the issues arising from the evaluation study than to provide clear-cut conclusions and recommendations, which it is felt would not be appropriate in this case. This is because firstly, the SKILLNET QSI programme was already being redesigned, under different funding arrangements and with different inputs from providing institutions, as the present evaluation was nearing completion: recommendations based on Phases 1–3 of the programme might well, therefore, be in part redundant. Secondly, as will become clear from the ensuing discussion, some of the findings point to important areas not within the immediate control, either administratively or at policy level, of the SKILLNET operation.

The chapter is divided into three main sections, constituting a 'nest' of areas for consideration. The first of these is the SKILLNET operation itself (next section); the second is the immediate context of the partnership between the LDDC, ILEA and LBN (third section); and the third is the wider context of training for employment in London's redeveloped docklands (final section).

REVIEW OF THE *SKILLNET* QSI OPERATION

The general picture

The evaluation has highlighted several areas within the programme which require comment. In very broad terms, the SKILLNET QSI programme has, since its inception, channelled considerable resources towards the training of unemployed young adults with low educational qualifications. This can be set against a finding of Deloitte Haskins and Sells (1987) that '*The highest level of* [VET] *funding currently goes to those on advanced courses which have the best job prospects*' and indicates, at least in theory, the contribution SKILLNET is making to the less-advantaged groups (educationally and occupationally) in a reviving inner city economy. SKILLNET's potential for innovation generally – in creating a collaborative network at policy and provision levels, in attempting to design curriculum content and accreditation appropriate for the trainees, and in generating closer links between local educational practitioners and employers – has received support from a wide variety of participants and observers.

However, findings from the survey of trainees and from interviews with staff appear to indicate that the main benefits of this provision have so far been felt at an individual level rather than in statistically observable ways.

A number of reasons exist to explain this, but probably the fundamental one is the manner and mechanisms of SKILLNET QSI's inception. This will surely come as no surprise to people involved in teaching or administrating SKILLNET courses, but cannot be said too emphatically for the benefit of those contemplating a similar venture. The legacy of having to provide, *inter alia*, for 1,000 training places entailed by the ESF grant was long-lasting and, arguably, detrimental to the delivery of training appropriate to the intended client groups. Paradoxically, it was the very scale of the first phase which seems to have meant that SKILLNET's potential impact was muted. In addition, the way in which the partnership between the LDDC, ILEA and LBN came about bequeathed ambiguities and tensions which it has been a continuing task for present participants (both administrators and educationists) to disentangle.

In an important sense, therefore, the achievements of SKILLNET QSI cannot be weighed in isolation from its history. One might imagine – albeit with the invaluable benefit of hindsight – a contrasting scenario in which a much smaller scheme had been piloted with a few providing institutions, selected by specific criteria. Careful monitoring of trainees' experiences and outcomes, combined with continuous and detailed feedback from tutors and heads of department, might have enabled the programme to have been modified and augmented in a controllable way. If this had been complemented from the beginning by input on employment-related issues, through regular discussions with a cross-section of 'new' local employers for example, then SKILLNET's impact might by now have looked rather different. The ESF funding effectively prevented this from happening by determining the scale of the very first operation and therefore making it necessary to deploy resources for throughput in preference to monitoring. But the 'add-on' way in which ILEA and LBN came to join forces with LDDC – in a move dominated at least as much by expedience as by educational policy – was also perhaps responsible by default for a somewhat incoherent first stage. Phases 2–4 could be viewed, in large part, as reactions to (rather than incorporating lessons from) the serious problems generated by Phase 1.

Specific areas of concern

Understandably, therefore, some aspects of SKILLNET QSI can be identified as constituting problems for trainees and staff in SKILLNET and the providing institutions which have been noted in the evaluation. Some of the principles and procedures have been modified in whole or part for the 1988 programme of training courses which has already started to run – such as the shift away from reliance on ESF money – although such changes may take time to be felt or observed at the point of delivery. The following subsections outline the major sources of concern and note the kinds of action which might accelerate constructive changes; appropriate levels of resourcing would need to be allocated.

1. Recruitment, induction, on-course support, follow-up and post course counselling

There were several problematic aspects of the broad area of trainee counselling and support. The nature and level of support necessary for SKILLNET trainees (who were likely to have had earlier experiences of educational and occupational 'failure') had not been appropriately estimated. Responsibility for what turned out to be a large undertaking was not clearly delineated as between SKILLNET and providers. Too few resources were available within SKILLNET to tackle the variety and scale of need of many trainees on a systematic basis throughout their SKILLNET 'training career'. Where such resources were supplied by providing institutions, they seem not to have been counted as part of the cost of running a SKILLNET course.

Possible action: A clearer definition, agreed between SKILLNET and providers, of the scale and detail of what trainee support is needed, when and by whom given.

2. Consistency of delivery and outcomes

Although much emphasis was placed on a common 'identity' for SKILLNET trainees in the initial phases, it is clear that this was often either not practicable – in the sense that trainees took their cue from the providing institution – or else led to unwanted consequences if trainees felt themselves marked out unfavourably from their peers. A more effective policy might be to emphasise the common themes of SKILLNET courses. At the moment, the marked differences between courses in terms of their delivery (including trainee support) and outcomes (including accreditation) militates against this.

Possible action: Exploration by SKILLNET with providing institutions and employers of what could or should constitute common characteristics of SKILLNET courses. These might include a foundation/basic skills element, an approach to confidence-building, a common system of profiling and accreditation, an agreed level of on-course support and post-course career counselling, on-site child care provision *(see below).*

3. Types of courses

Some lack of agreement emerged about what kinds of courses (for instance, high-tech or low-tech) are most appropriate for the kinds of job opportunities available for SKILLNET trainees. ESF funding criteria specified a high-tech element in courses on the first four phases.

Possible action: Systematic monitoring by SKILLNET of courses according to trainee outcomes. Monitoring by SKILLNET of local job opportunities and recruitment practices.

4. Accreditation and progression

There was some lack of clarity about what trainees would receive by way of course accreditation. Some courses were designed to lead to CGLI, RSA or other nationally recognised qualifications, while others carried no formal acknowledgement, such as a certificate of attendance. In practice, recognised qualifications could not necessarily be gained by trainees because courses were too short to cover both the learning skills they needed as well as specific course content.

Possible action: Staged progression from basic or foundation-level work through to higher vocational levels, agreed by discussion between SKILLNET and providers, together with employers where appropriate. Formative use of assessment, to enable trainees to evaluate their own progress.

5. Open learning and open access

While acknowledging the continuing importance for SKILLNET of the quite specific issues raised by open learning and open access respectively, the evaluation concludes that so far these have tended to constitute aspects of practice brought about primarily by ESF funding criteria, rather than by educational theory. Preferences and practices of providing institutions contributed to the interpretation of open learning in practice; but perhaps the decisive factor was tutors' judgements about the appropriateness of open learning for their trainees. There was a lack of centrally available information about the use, and usefulness, of open learning materials and approaches.

Possible action: Information-gathering from course tutors about the way open learning techniques and materials are and could be used, together with some assessment of their cost-effectiveness. Areas for investigation would include open access, tutorial support, self-study materials, negotiated curricula. Discussion of the intended function and proportion of open learning for trainees on SKILLNET QSI courses not funded through ESF.

6. Monitoring of SKILLNET trainees

Some monitoring of trainees is already implied in (1) and (3) above; nonetheless, it emerged from Chapter 7 that the relationship between the local labour market and trainees' expectations and motivation, their previous employment history and the outcomes of their previous and current training, is more tenuous than might be thought. Research on a large scale plotting the experiences of distinct cohorts of SKILLNET trainees is probably a counsel of perfection, but SKILLNET needs more facts and figures with which to support its strategies.

Possible action: Some in-depth study of small samples of trainees on different courses in different institutions, plotting their pre- and post-SKILLNET histories, qualifications, aspirations and experiences.

7. Age range of trainees

There was a consensus that training and retraining needs to be offered to local unemployed people over the age of 25. The upper age limit of 25 was specified by the ESF funding criteria.

Possible action: Courses offered to unemployed people without age limit, given that appropriate curricula can be devised for older people who may have personal circumstances and educational or labour market experience markedly different from those of younger people.

8. Policy dissemination

It was remarked in a variety of contexts by participant staff (both within SKILLNET and in the providing institutions) that they were not always aware of what policy decisions had been made and how they had been arrived at. In particular, it occasionally emerged that lines of communication between heads of department/managers and tutors/supervisors in institutions were not always optimally functioning. SKILLNET policy might be discussed and agreed at head-of-department level without permeating to the point of delivery. This could partly account for the differences in delivery discussed above. Meetings have been taking place among some groups of tutors, in electronics for example, with positive outcomes, though with the distinct purpose of designing a list of core skills for accreditation.

Possible action: Regular meetings instituted by SKILLNET with staff involved with trainees, to provide a network of discussion, dissemination and support. Tutors might find it helpful to be grouped according to subject area.

9. Child care

Although this constitutes an aspect of trainee support, provision of child care facilities for trainees with children requires separate planning and resourcing. It was clear from the survey and the trainee interviews that for some trainees the problem of child care (its cost, quality or non-existence) impeded their take-up or completion of chosen courses. Provision of reliable, free or cheap child care might become one of the common 'themes' of SKILLNET courses. SKILLNET might also raise the issue with the local authorities and local employers, as one of the factors implicated in whether trainees are able to find employment.

Possible action: Consideration by SKILLNET of a policy of providing resources for crèches or extra crèche-workers in providing institutions.

Further possibilities

Other, more general, ways of generating discussion and disseminating information could include:

- *A newsletter or bulletin* produced by SKILLNET at regular intervals and distributed to some or all of the following: practitioners in providing institutions, local community centres, trainees on courses, local employers. It could be a forum for debate as well as a way of building up a SKILLNET 'identity'. The intended audience would clearly need to be decided on beforehand, since this would determine the content and tone of articles.
- *A video.* This could be used for publicity (to recruit trainees or involve local employers) or, with slightly different emphases, for induction purposes, to show a number of SKILLNET courses in different institutions, interviews with past and present trainees, with tutors and so forth. Even more usefully, a video might be made with a more restricted function, principally with practitioners in mind. Presentation of problems arising from teaching a new kind of client group and different ways of dealing with those problems – perhaps conducted through a series of 'mock-ups', role plays and ensuing discussion – could be mounted as a focus for a SKILLNET tutor network.

Two broad areas for possible action therefore emerge from this section:

- ***Market and other research, in order to acquire realistic labour market and occupational information; together with internal monitoring of course delivery and outcomes, leading to:***
- ***Agreement on, and implementation of, an identifiable SKILLNET curriculum.***

REVIEW OF THE CONTEXT OF PARTNERSHIP

Changes of policy have constitutionally to be ratified by SKILLNET's policy board, which is, so to say, an embodiment of the three-way partnership between the LDDC, ILEA and LBN. This partnership occasioned much positive comment, on the grounds that it was a noteworthy achievement for bodies with such contrasting remits to be working together towards a common goal. There are, however, some uncertainties within and surrounding the partnership agreement.

The future of the partnership

First, SKILLNET is incidentally at a stage when the future is less than clear for reasons external to the agreement: two of its three sponsors are likely eventually to disappear. Present govenment plans to abolish ILEA will undoubtedly affect college course and other provision, though it is not clear in what ways precisely. Additionally, there will be an estimated shortfall within ILEA of over £100 million in the period 1988–9, as pre-abolition cuts in expenditure take effect. In consequence of ILEA's demise, there will almost certainly be a loss of particular personnel; a large question mark hangs over the continuing provision of adult education and the careers and other services, at least at their present levels. Moreover, if responsibility for educational provision devolves as planned to the individual boroughs, the poorest boroughs – such as Tower Hamlets and Southwark (which participate in SKILLNET) – are, by definition, those in greatest need and with fewest resources. It is not yet clear how these boroughs will be enabled to meet their educational responsibilities. Nor has sufficient attention so far been given to the question of how coherence of provision *across* boroughs could be achieved. As far as SKILLNET is concerned, if the individual boroughs replace ILEA as partners in the SKILLNET agreement, their remits will presumably have to be negotiated separately. In the event of ILEA's abolition, the checks and balances, so to say, between the different sponsors will change. It may be that in consequence the LDDC will adopt a more *dirigiste* style than formerly, if only by default.

The LDDC, by contrast, was initially (in 1981) envisaged as a temporary body, expected to cease operation by 1996. However, the latest information is that no wind-up date has been confirmed. The disbandment of the LDDC would have a major effect on SKILLNET's funding, since the LDDC/DoE is intended to replace the ESF as SKILLNET's largest source of funding from 1988.

The nature and functions of the SKILLNET partnership are therefore susceptible to an incalculable degree of change over the next five to ten years. One effect of this will be to hinder forward planning, both broadly and in detail. Yet, in the meantime, other levels of uncertainty are more susceptible to clarification.

Ambiguities of SKILLNET's role

As was remarked above, the way the partnership was formed did not make for smooth relationships initially and one outcome of this was, indirectly, the inheritance of certain ambiguities about SKILLNET's role and function. As far as some trainees were concerned, for example, SKILLNET was identified in their minds with the valuable personal and career support offered by the counsellors; for others, SKILLNET was more or less just a name connected with the appearance of a cheque for

their attendance allowance. For some institutions, SKILLNET acted as an impetus to pursue curricular innovations. For a few, SKILLNET provided a chance to collaborate in a new kind of partnership in urban redevelopment. For yet others, SKILLNET's main role was as a funding mechanism. However, a different set of perceptions altogether, held by the LDDC among others, implicitly allotted SKILLNET the role of delivering trainees into employment, at least in so far as its public credibility was concerned. This may be a legacy from the time when the LDDC was planning to found the Docklands Open College, which was to assist the supply of trained workers to fill new jobs. In practice, SKILLNET had insufficient control over curriculum content (including tutorial support, careers guidance and so forth) and trainee follow-up to fulfil such a role centrally. The continuing obligation could be said to have turned SKILLNET into something of a hybrid.

Delivery of trainees into employment does not appear as one of SKILLNET's aims as set out in the 1986 Agreement. But a general ambiguity seems with hindsight to have been enshrined in the agreement. It is stated, for instance, that SKILLNET would establish *'an exchange or brokerage'*, as distinct from provision (which would be in the hands of the two LEAs), but at the same time SKILLNET would *'meet the education and training needs of local residents.'* It would not necessarily have been appropriate to spell out how this could or should be done, as part of the aims. On the other hand, some reference might usefully have been made in the document to a foreseeable need to reconcile some of the aims in practice. With new arrangements currently under discussion which would make SKILLNET more closely accountable to the LDDC, the implications of the different options for resolving this area of ambiguity need to be carefully considered. Should the networking and collaborative goals of SKILLNET be stressed, which have perhaps been the most innovative feature of the programme, but which are slow to mature? Or should the 'delivery' aspect be awarded priority, given the current concern, both locally and nationally, about the effects on local employment rates of urban redevelopment?

Differences of opinion, both between the different partners and between SKILLNET staff, have been expressed about the direction SKILLNET should now take in the medium term. It seems clear from past experience that, unless these are resolved by a full discussion between the present sponsors resulting in a policy commanding wide agreement from staff, SKILLNET will be in the invidious position of trying to fulfil conflicting demands.

REVIEW OF THE TRAINING CONTEXT

If we now look at the SKILLNET QSI programme as an operation to support individuals in their search for work, in the widest sense of that project, it is possible from the evaluation to identify extrinsic as well as internal factors influencing its likelihood of success. Indeed, it is important to do so because otherwise judgements about SKILLNET's effectiveness would lack their proper context.

Training as process

It will be helpful, in discussing this general context, to view training as a *process*. First, any specific training experience makes a possible contribution to an individual's prospects and aspirations; secondly, there are cumulative effects of such training experiences throughout a person's working life. Thirdly, different kinds of commitments to training are made over time by industry on the one hand and by the state on the other. It is also worthwhile to review and reinterpret the 'skills mismatch' argument (alluded to in Chapter 3) in the light of training-as-process.

Provision of training by employers

Because employers justifiably give priority to maximising their rate of return, which they calculate to include the risks of employees leaving their establishment, employers tend to prefer 'one-way' transferability of skills. McRae (1987) argues that 'flexibility' – a notion favoured by employers and industrialists, as has been noted earlier – may actually be detrimental to the employment prospects of young people and to the usefulness of their training:

> *'The rates of industrial and occupational mobility...were exceptionally high* [demonstrating industrial and occupational flexibility]... *Subsequent moves to jobs in different industries or occupations may fail either to utilise previous training or to provide new training. Hence, not only may previous training be wasted but performance in new jobs may be inadequate because of lack of relevant training and experience, thus exposing the young worker to increased risk of job loss...the extent of training received by young people in their most important jobs had no bearing on their chances of finding new jobs from unemployment.'*

Employer-funded training is an investment made by employers: the more 'transferable' the employee's training is, the higher the risk to the employer that the employee will be 'poached'. There is arguably therefore a tendency among employers to ensure that employer-funded training makes a contribution to the particular firm, rather than to the industry as a whole. The non-statutory training organisations which have to a great extent replaced the Industry Training Boards provide little evidence of fulfilling this wider function. A recent article reports that, according to an MSC review, nearly half the non-statutory training organisations were considered ineffective (*Employment Gazette*, April 1988). Employer-funded training is therefore more likely to be job-specific and 'topping-up' than to lead to a recognised qualification. Discussions between educationists and employers about the training needs of employees tend to be dominated by what employers require in the short term rather than by negotiated division of responsibility for training a skilled workforce.

However, an innovation in employer-funded training is being planned in the dockland area by Canary Wharf developers, who have agreed to provide £2.5 million (£500,000 initially and £250,000 every year for eight years) for training in Tower Hamlets. The money will be paid into a charity called Tower Hamlets Education Trust and will be spent on 'training in technical and management skills' (source: *Times Educational Supplement*, 25 March 1988).

Provision of training by the public sector

The greater part of vocational education and training which leads to recognised qualifications is likely to be provided by the public sector (Rigg, 1988). One of the major indicators of people's likelihood of receiving post-compulsory training (with its potential for increased employment opportunities, job satisfaction, promotional prospects and yet more training) is their level of previous qualification: the higher their qualifications, the more likely they are to receive further education or training. Furthermore, people with higher levels of qualifications are those who, generally speaking, stay on at school past the age of 16. There is accordingly at least a *prima facie* case, if policy-makers are concerned about increasing training opportunities, for attempting to maximise the likelihood of people continuing in full-time education. The key question for SKILLNET, meanwhile, is how to provide attractive second or third chances for people who are no longer 'in the system' – what sort of provision and support do they see themselves as needing?

A second important point about public-sector provision is how it can be effectively planned to relate to the job market. Problems of training supply are particularly acute in urban development areas, where planning is intentionally minimal; the 'market' is intended to control incoming and outgoing labour needs. Public-sector provision cannot therefore easily be tied in advance to unplanned demand, whilst on the other hand courses take time to be designed, approved and resourced. It has recently been pointed out, moreover, that some of the long-term problems of the economy *'arise in areas in which markets fail to deliver socially desirable results, notably in training'* (Crafts and Nicholas, 1988), which indicates a possible conflict of delivery between free market redevelopment and planned training for the jobs that redevelopment brings.

Squaring the circle? Skills mismatch revisited

Although the public sector bears the main responsibility for providing vocational education and training, educational establishments are often criticised by employers, industrialists and politicians for not preparing people adequately for the world of work. Curriculum content is often said to be insufficiently vocational or attitudes towards industry negative. Newsam (1988) made a particularly sharp attack on this position when he said that all political parties agree in turn that the *'poor economic performance of this country was not the result of unwise economic management by themselves or of the long-standing indifference throughout most of industry towards the training needs of the young. It was the fault of the schools'*. However, when economic performance improves, he says, nobody congratulates the schools – it is acclaimed as the combined result of competent industrial management and the government's economic policies.

Alternatively, individuals' lack of skills may be foregrounded, for which the remedy proposed is therefore some version of *'the notion that an individual's skills, if updated and made more relevant to labour market needs, would reduce the risk of unemployment and improve the standard of industrial training'* (Bevan and Varlaam, 1987).

However (as argued in Chapter 3), the relationship of unemployment to skills or labour shortage is not, according to a number of research papers, so easily defined and remedied. The problem is probably more accurately identified as structural than as amenable to tactical readjustment – for example, by individuals' motivation and skills acquisition. Roberts et al. (undated) assert that *'changes in the shape of the occupational structure would still have created shortages of well-qualified and surpluses of less-qualified school-leavers'*. They go on to say that *'market forces* [are] *resolving neither of these stresses. The main obstacles* [are] *not on the supply side... In general, the young people... were only too willing to upgrade their qualifications and skills, given the opportunity'*. Differences in unemployment rates between different groups in the population are often ascribed to differences in levels of individuals' qualifications or skills. However, there may be other factors at work, as Brown (1984) argues, including *'the frequent lack of fluency in English among Asian workers; the different residential locations of the majorities of white and black workers; an ethnic minority labour market which seems to be in some respects quite different from that of white workers; and racial discrimination, both direct and indirect'*. Yet a third major issue is that people with the lowest levels of educational or skills qualifications are *least* likely to get any subsequent training (Rigg, 1988; plus evidence in Wallman et al., 1987). These people are also the most likely to be long-term unemployed.

Skills mismatch and SKILLNET

It is arguable, then, that a straightforward model of skills mismatch which can be mitigated by the application of training at an individual level is too weak to support policy measures supposedly based on it. However, SKILLNET policy appears to have been shaped in effect by such a thesis, inherited from original proposals for the Docklands Open College and fuelled by pressures from industry (and, where these were similar, from the LDDC). These pressures would tend also to emphasise SKILLNET's role in delivering trainees into employment, as a way of measuring its success. One indirect effect of this may have been that when trainees could not, apparently, be delivered into jobs via training on the scale envisaged, a tendency arose for the onus to be placed further and further back on – indeed within – the 'inadequate' individual trainees. These were the people whom employers found to be insufficiently literate or confident and for whom single SKILLNET courses were insufficient. But they also had high hopes of SKILLNET, partly because so little alternative provision existed. It was this dilemma with which SKILLNET counselling staff found themselves grappling (as was described in Chapter 4).

It might be possible to reconcile some of these large and complex difficulties by seeing 'skills mismatch' as a snapshot picture. Introducing the notion of *process* into SKILLNET's policy-making would therefore be a priority in support of shorter-term goals. Indeed, a number of interviewees have contended that what is really missing is the vector of time: time for job-market restructuring to take effect, time for employers to learn to adapt their practices and planning to take account of the local labour-force, time for individual trainees to come to terms with what is required of them, time for them to become *'empowered'* in the words of one interviewee with long experience of both youth counselling and senior management. Training is only one aspect of this empowerment, but a crucial one.

Different ways of encouraging people to take up training and education may be entailed by this kind of perspective, such as a greater emphasis on outreach work and on analysis of needs negotiated with potential trainees themselves. As a principal of an adult education institute put it:

> *'Education for the disenfranchised is expensive. It is often inter-disciplinary. It rubs up against many of the ways of working large bureaucracies develop... Yet, if we are to develop a service more responsive to the changing needs of the inner city, we must risk more experimentation. All this... above all, points to the need for us to listen better and to try to respond on people's own terms in their own ways.'* (Tuckett, 1985).

The major problem here is that employers' time-scales are dependent on those of industry, and these tend to foreshorten the time-scales of a society and the individuals within it. Moreover, the outcomes of social regeneration cannot always be calibrated in the same way as those of economic redevelopment. Such observations inevitably bring further issues into play, such as the 'ownership' of training – *for whose goals and priorities is training provided?* – which cannot be covered in the scope of this report, but which nonetheless must bear on the framework within which SKILLNET operates. How far can, or should, SKILLNET be thought of as a potential catalyst in the social revitalisation without which local unemployed people will remain outside the pale of economic recovery?

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX [A]

PROJECT INFORMATION BULLETIN

TITLE: EVALUATION OF SKILLNET (RP441 REPLAN)

STARTING DATE: 1st June 1987

COMPLETION DATE: 31st December 1987

AIMS

To monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the London Docklands SKILLNET Quick Start Initiative (QSI) programme.

BACKGROUND

SKILLNET is an education and training innovation geared to the economic regeneration of the London Docklands and has been pioneered by the collaborative efforts of the London Docklands Corporation, ILEA and the London Borough of Newham. Support from these bodies has been supplemented by resources from the European Social Fund.

The brief for Phase 1 of SKILLNET QSI was to provide a range of education and training opportunities which would match the skills of local residents to the growing number of jobs in the Docklands. The emphasis was primarily on meeting the commercial and technological skill requirements of the employer partners in the revitalisation programme. Focussing on the young unemployed, SKILLNET recruited 500 jobless people under the age of 25 to undertake up to three modules from a choice of 41 available in 11 institutions. Each module involved about 200 hours of study, approximately half in college and half by distance learning. Ultimately the scheme organisers hoped that accreditation by 'passport' recording profiles and examination passes would receive recognition by examination bodies and employers. Phase 2 and 3 SKILLNET QSI programmes, which largely follow the same pattern as the first phase opportunities, are now under way.

The FEU's criteria for REPLAN projects allows for the inclusion of projects concerned with 'systematic evaluation of an innovative pilot learning programme' of which this is an example.

METHOD

A project worker would be appointed to:

(i) collect and analyse information on occupational and educational needs;

(ii) review the curricula and learning methods used;

(iii) investigate trainees' experiences, reactions and destinations;

(iv) examine accreditation and progression issues;

(v) examine the role of SKILLNET QSI as a placement into employment agency.

Methods used would include interviews with students, tutors and SKILLNET's industrial and commercial liaison officers; collection of information on content, structure, modular design and length of course unit; triangulation of provider and user reactions, questionnaires and interviews directed at trainees recruited in SKILLNET's first full year of operation; objective assessment of accreditation methods adopted and the success of the programme in progressing students.

A Steering Committee containing representatives from SKILLNET's participating bodies, the MSC, the appropriate open learning federation (SCOPE), NFER and FEU will monitor the work of the project.

OUTCOME

A report suitable for consideration for publication and dissemination by the FEU which will evaluate SKILLNET QSI's attempt to:

(i) identify education and training needs in an area of high unemployment and rapid urban regeneration;

(ii) recruit trainees from an environment undergoing fundamental economic and social change;

(iii) design and deliver appropriate employment-related curricula;

(iv) secure relevant accreditation and progression to further training and employment.

PROJECT STAFF

Project Director: Dr. Sheila Stoney, National Foundation for Educational Research.

Project Worker: Lesley Saunders, NFER.

FEU Contacts: Martin Johnson/Dennis Drysdale.

MEMBERSHIP OF STEERING COMMITTEE

Ms Trixy Alberga
Mr Trevor Goepfert
MSC London Docklands Liaison Group

Mr Graham Bann (Director)
Mr Philip Barnard (Deputy Director)
[seconded from ILEA]
Ms Janet Drysdale (Counsellor)
SKILLNET Office

Mr Michael Dann
Head of Continuing Education
London Borough of Newham

Dr Jo Douek
ILEA Staff Inspector (Science and Engineering)

Ms Annette Giles (SCOPE)
Hackney Adult Education Institute

Mr Martin Johnson (Chair)
Development Officer,
Further Education Unit

Mrs Pat White
Principal Careers Officer,
ILEA Careers Service Headquarters

Dr Sheila Stoney, Principal Research Officer
Mr David Sims, Research Officer
Ms Lesley Saunders, Research Officer
National Foundation for Educational Research

TRAINEE POSTAL QUESTIONNAIRE: ADMINISTRATION

ADMINISTRATION

Questionnaire to attenders

The questionnaire was designed and piloted during the summer. With the SKILLNET data base as a contact list, the main questionnaire was sent out in the early autumn to all trainees who had attended at least one session of a course on Phase 1, 2 or 3. A reminder letter and a duplicate questionnaire were sent out after five weeks to those who had not yet replied.

The response rate varied, as was expected, between phases: 25 per cent for Phase 1, 25 per cent for Phase 2 and 41 per cent for Phase 3, giving an overall rate of 30 per cent. Although we were not – on the basis of the pilot conducted in the summer – expecting a high response rate, we believed that it could be substantially improved by the kind of intensive follow-up work undertaken during the pilot. Accordingly a temporary assistant was employed to telephone trainees who had not replied. This proved a productive strategy in contacting or tracing respondents, and the response rate was thereby increased to 41 per cent. A few questionnaires were returned too late to be included in the analysis.

In several cases, both postal and telephone responses contained inquiries or problems which we directed to SKILLNET; questionnaires were checked for this as they were logged in. Such problems were most often to do with 'passports', with late allowance payments, with unreceived course certificates or with inquiries about other available SKILLNET courses.

A curiosity emerged from postal and telephone responses, which was also noted in the pilot: some people – a small number, it should be said – claimed never to have heard of SKILLNET and could not understand why we had contacted them. Our policy to postal respondents was to apologise in writing; with people we telephoned, we inquired what other courses they had taken recently, in order to discover whether perhaps they had done a course without knowing that it was part of the SKILLNET programme.

Pro forma to non-attenders

A brief pro forma was sent out to all those registered on the data base who were recorded as not attending any sessions of a course on Phases 1, 2 or 3. We inquired which course they had enrolled for, why they had decided not to take the course and what their present occupation was. We originally understood that these were people who had enrolled but who did not attend; and that the names and addresses of people who had inquired but not enrolled were recorded separately on record sheets (which we photocopied, with a view to contacting inquirers had there been sufficient time). Subsequent clarification by SKILLNET, however, showed that the data base for Phase 2 contained the names and addresses of inquirers as well as enrollers. Some replies, therefore, were from people who had been turned down by SKILLNET as ineligible, who were understandably somewhat irritated by our inquiry. Additionally, some people expressed puzzlement over the letter because, according to them, they had not only enrolled but had also attended SKILLNET courses. The overall response rate was in the region of 10 per cent.

TRAINEE PERSONAL INTERVIEW SCHEDULE: ADMINISTRATION

The research encountered something of the same problem as the courses it was investigating, namely a low response rate, both to the postal questionnaire (see Appendix [C]) and to the appointments which were arranged for personal interviews. The problem therefore remains intractable of general analysis, although it was possible to follow up several individual cases and also to hazard some guesses as to likely reasons. In attempting to fulfil the undertaking to interview up to 100 SKILLNET trainees, the researcher had to bear in mind the following:

- trainees from Phases 1 and 2 had done their courses a year or more ago, so their willingness or availability to be interviewed were unlikely to be substantial (as evinced by the initial response rate to the postal questionnaire)
- addresses on the data base were not necessarily up to date
- many entries on the data base lacked a telephone number: 34 per cent overall, as compared with a national figure of 29 per cent (source: *Social Trends*, 1987 edition, Central Statistical Office) – though lack of a telephone number should not, of course, be taken in every case to indicate lack of a telephone.

The breakdown of those with no telephone number was as follows:

	Respondents (%)	*Total data base (%)*
Phase 1	27	32
Phase 2	30	34
Phase 3	43	36
Average of all phases	33	34

(Percentages are rounded to the nearest integer.)

In other words, the proportion of questionnaire respondents who were on the telephone was almost identical to that of SKILLNET trainees overall.

The following **strategies** were therefore adopted:

- Some of the people attending SKILLNET Phase 4 courses (autumn 1987) were interviewed on-site in small groups. The major disadvantages with this were the lack of information relating to destinations and the possibly inhibiting effect on trainees of being asked to comment on the course while in attendance.
- People who had responded to the postal questionnaire and who lived in the dockland area (see Appendix [G]) were contacted to arrange an appointment with the researcher at one of four reasonably accessible locations: the café at the public swimming baths on the Isle of Dogs, the Tabard Centre (AEI) in Southwark, the Tower Hamlets AEI in Whitechapel and the West Ham Centre of Newham Community College in Newham. Prospective interviewees were divided into four broad geographical areas for this, regardless of where they had done their courses, in the hope that none of them would have far to travel.
- Some of those without a telephone number were contacted by letter, in order to try and prevent a bias towards those with telephones (generally agreed to be in a higher socio-economic group). They were asked to meet the researcher at one of the four locations and a range of times was given.
- All those contacted were sent a confirmatory letter, a map of the location and an assurance that public transport fares would be reimbursed. A telephone number to ring in case of their having to miss the appointment was given.
- A very small number of house calls was arranged in particular circumstances (such as an interviewee's child being ill).
- Setting up the appointments was itself a time-consuming task, necessitating evening and weekend work, with an average of three phone calls to secure an appointment. An assistant was recruited.

The **outcome** of these various strategies was exiguous in relation to the effort expended:

- Two of the first ten appointments made by letter were acknowledged; none were kept. Whatever the reasons (including problems with postal deliveries), it was decided that this strategy should be abandoned.
- Many people initially contacted by telephone said they were unavailable during the day to meet the researcher. Several of them were available at weekends or in the evenings, but for reasons of researchers' safety, extensive out-of-hours field-work is not a normal part of NFER procedure.
- Of those appointments made by telephone, about half were actually kept. This was felt to be a not particularly productive use of the time allocated.
- Because of their informal context, daytime house calls seemed to yield useful in-depth information. However, the time taken by these interviews was about two-and-a-half times that of the usual interview and effectively prohibited the researcher from extending this strategy.
- In order, therefore, to obtain within the time available the range of information that had been envisaged from this exercise, the researcher decided that the remaining interviews should be conducted by telephone. People seemed to be more willing to be interviewed in this way rather than to make future appointments to meet away from home.
- Attempts to stratify the sample (by gender, ethnic origin, courses taken, destination) were constrained by all the above considerations. Interviews were essentially conducted on the basis of who was willing and available to be interviewed. The question remains of how to elicit extra effort from people when there is no direct advantage accruing to them. This is surely illustrative of the problems faced by SKILLNET staff in monitoring trainees and providing support.

LIST OF *SKILLNET* QSI COURSES AND PROVIDING INSTITUTIONS

City and East London College

Sept. 1986	*Electronics for Communication Engineers*
Sept. 1986 Feb. 1987	*Microprocessors*
Sept. 1986 Feb. 1987	*Computing*
Sept. 1986	*Introduction to Computing*
Sept. 1986 Feb. 1987	*Business Accounts*
Sept. 1986 Feb. 1987	*Reception/Office Skills*
Sept. 1986 Feb. 1987	*Keyboard Skills/Typing and Word-processing*

Hackney College

Sept. 1986	*Electronic Craft (City and Guild)*
Sept. 1986	*Computing*
Sept. 1986 Feb. 1987	*Keyboarding*
Sept. 1986	*Business Studies*
Sept. 1986	*Painting and Decorating*
Sept. 1986 Feb. 1987 Apr. 1987	*Motor Vehicle Bodywork*
Sept. 1986	*Motor Vehicle Servicing*
Sept. 1986	*BTEC Mechanics and Electronics*
Apr. 1987	*Electronics and Microcomputing*
Apr. 1987	*Electronic Servicing 2*
Apr. 1987	*Introduction to Computer-aided Engineering*

South East London Technical College (SELTEC)

Sept. 1986 Feb. 1987	*Electronics*
Sept. 1986	*Computer/Business Education*
Sept. 1986	*Building/Painting and Decorating*
Sept. 1986	*Building/Carpentry and Joinery*
Sept. 1986	*Building/Brickwork*
Sept. 1986	*Building/Plastering*

Newham Community College

Sept. 1986	*Electronics at Work*
Sept. 1986	*Keyboard Skills in Office Communications*
Sept. 1986 Feb. 1987	*Keyboard Skills for Data-processing*
Sept. 1986 Feb. 1987	*New Technology in the Office*
Sept. 1986	*Building Skills (Wet Trades)*
Sept. 1986	*Building Skills (Dry Trades)*
Sept. 1986	*Office Systems at Work*
Sept. 1986 Feb. 1987	*Equipment Servicing*
Sept. 1986 Feb. 1987	*Introduction to Modern Banking*
Feb. 1987 Apr. 1987	*Bricklaying*
Apr. 1987	*Word-processing*
Apr. 1987	*Information-processing in the Office*

Tower Hamlets AEI

Sept. 1986	*Driving*

Southwark College

Sept. 1986 Apr. 1987	*Electronics and Micro-electronics Systems*
Sept. 1986 Feb. 1987 Apr. 1987	*Information Technology*
Sept. 1986 Feb. 1987 Apr. 1987	*Community Catering and Fast Foods*
Apr. 1987	*Problem Solving with Pascal*
Apr. 1987	*Modern Office Skills*

Southwark AEI

Sept. 1986	*Introduction to Computing in the Office*
Sept. 1986	*Driving*
Sept. 1986 Apr. 1987	*Foundation Course Basic Work Skills*
Apr. 1987	*Computer Literacy and Information Technology*
Apr. 1987	*Office Skills for Work*

Polytechnic of North London

Sept. 1986	*Business Studies for Women*

Docklands ITEC

Sept. 1986 Feb. 1987 Apr. 1987	*Electronics*
Feb. 1987	*Microprocessor Fault Location and Repair*

Woolwich College

Sept. 1986 / Feb. 1987 } *Computer-aided Engineering*

London College of Furniture

Feb. 1987 *Co-operative Business Development*

City of London Polytechnic

Apr. 1987 *The Electronic Office*

Enterprise Training

Apr. 1987 *Computer and Office Skills*

Project Fullemploy Greenwich

Apr. 1987 *Modern Office Skills*

Goldsmiths College

Apr. 1987 *Computer and Print: Women in Technology*

Tower Hamlets Advanced Technology Training (THATT)

Apr. 1987 *Introduction to Computing for Bilingual Students*

Apr. 1987 *Introduction to Computing for Bilingual Women Students*

CORE SKILLS FOR *SKILLNET* ELECTRONICS PROFILE

1. Safe and correct use and care of hand-tools

Including: cutters, pliers, wire-strippers, wire wrappers, soldering iron, desoldering equipment, rules, cableformers, screwdrivers, bending tools, bifurcated cable connectors

2. Soldering/electrical connection/desoldering

Including: bifurcated connections, use of press release suckers

3. Knowledge of components

Including: recognition/differentiation of components
standard colour codes/markings
preferred value/tolerances
costing/value/use of catalogue
safe handling
static protection

4. Wiring

Including: systems and types of cable
knowledge of plugs, fuses, switches
awareness of SMT (surface-mounted technology)

5. Knowledge of simple circuit diagrams

Including: practical interpretation of a diagram
recognition of components symbols
basic work on (not necessarily construction of) various circuits including transistor, integrated, discrete, printed, stripboard, etc.

6. Introductory use of instruments

Including: multimeter, logic probe, logic pulsar, oscilloscope, signal generator

7. Awareness of safety

Details as for C&G 224 Syllabus regarding safety

8. Mechanic skills

Including: gears, fitting spanners, use of appropriate screwdrivers and screws

It was agreed that a certain degree of theoretical knowledge would be utilised in the accomplishment of all the above skills. It would therefore not be necessary to include a separate item for theory.

DOCKLANDS AREA

It emerged during the evaluation that there were some difficulties of definition and perception associated with the term 'Docklands'.

DEFINITION

The geographical area for which the LDDC had direct responsibility covered parts of the London boroughs of Newham, Southwark and Tower Hamlets (the 'urban development area' – UDA). It was this area which was of primary importance to the Corporation's officers concerned with training provision and its outcomes. A senior LDDC officer explained that it would have been difficult, on purely social grounds, for the Corporation to be seen to be supporting non-UDA residents who were the responsibility of the local authorities and other agencies operating in those areas, without first ensuring that residents within the UDA had been given every possible opportunity of training through SKILLNET into a permanent job or into further training.

However, many interviewees were of the opinion that the region affected by the redevelopment brief of the LDDC was in reality much wider. The SKILLNET programme recruited from this wider base, which may be said to include not only the entire boroughs of Newham, Southwark and Tower Hamlets but also parts of Lewisham, Greenwich and Hackney. One of the major reasons for this wider interpretation is that Docklands cannot be considered a 'self-contained area'. *'Within Greater London no self-contained areas exist; in common with the rest of Greater London, the greater part of the Newham population work outside the borough and the major part of the working population live outside the borough.'* (Source: *Memorandum to the Employment Committee of the House of Commons*, Newham Community College.) There has been continuing discussion between the LDDC and SKILLNET about where the boundaries of SKILLNET's geographical 'constituency' ought to be drawn.

PERCEPTION

SKILLNET's earlier publicity for QSI courses set out to attract people 'living in Docklands'. However, not all people in the eligible boroughs think of themselves as living in the dockland area. It would have been advisable, according to some tutors, to have listed the boroughs individually.

WORKING DEFINITION FOR THE RESEARCH

In order to plot the distribution of SKILLNET's recruits by area from postal addresses on the data base (see Chapter 5), London postal districts were divided as follows:

i. 'Docklands' (that is, areas within the LDDC but not coterminous with it)

E6	East Ham
E14	Poplar
E16	Victoria Docks and North Woolwich
E1	Wapping
SE16	Rotherhithe
SE1	Bermondsey

ii. Other East End

E8	Hackney
E15	Stratford
E2	Bethnal Green
E3	Bow
E9	Homerton
E13	Plaistow
EC3	Tower Hill

iii. Other East or South East London postal districts

iv. Other London postal districts

v. Outside London

Interviewees for the follow-up trainee interviews were selected from groups (i) and (ii) only, on the grounds that, taken together, these constituted the majority of SKILLNET trainees. We also did not want to ask people to travel far in order to attend interviews (see Appendix [D]).

DOCKLANDS *SKILLNET* AGREEMENT

(A) BACKGROUND

(1) Docklands SKILLNET represents a network of education and training provision in London Docklands. The LDDC, ILEA and London Borough of Newham have entered into a partnership to promote post-16 provision. This membership is embodied in an initiative known as Docklands SKILLNET.

The aims of Docklands SKILLNET are described in (B) below.

(2) All three bodies agree that the arrangements for operating Docklands SKILLNET need to be confirmed in a formal agreement. This document represents that formal agreement. All of the matters covered by the agreement have been agreed to by the members of the three sponsoring bodies.

(3) The agreed proposals that follow refer to the detailed arrangements between the three sponsors – ILEA, LBN and LDDC – each of which has clear statutory responsibilities and powers.

(B) AIMS OF THE CO-OPERATIVE ARRANGEMENTS (DOCKLANDS SKILLNET)

(4) These are divided into two categories:

4.1 The purposes of co-operation being:

(a) to meet the education and training needs of local residents and to raise skill levels where necessary to match new employment opportunities

(b) to use resources effectively and avoid duplication of provision

(c) to provide skills relevant to the local economy

(d) to promote and encourage more flexible access to training through the development of non-standard entry, credit accumulation and transfer and through other means, e.g. child-care provision

(e) to increase training in high-technology skills

(f) to relate market research to course and staff development

(g) to promote learning using new technology.

4.2 The form of co-operation being:

(a) to establish an exchange or brokerage for the providers of education/training, actual or potential students and other groups, e.g. employers and validating bodies

(b) to give priority to developing new provision to meet identified need

(c) to establish a partnership between the sponsors and their institutions in order to meet changing local needs for education/training

(d) to distinguish specific roles of sponsoring bodies:

The LDDC will concentrate on seeking additional development funds and on providing local labour market and other intelligence which will include overall training needs and employment trends as well as specific employer needs, without however diverting significant resources away from the delivery of service to local employers and residents. (The LDDC will not make direct provision of education and training.)

The two LEAs will develop and change provision within their own institutions. (Providers of education and training, other than LBN and ILEA, will be encouraged to contribute to the developing work of SKILLNET and to make agreed direct provision.)

(C) GOVERNMENT AND MANAGEMENT ARRANGEMENTS

(5) This Project brings together three sponsors, the functions, powers and organisation of which are in some respects very different. The aims of the Project are to promote change and development and, at this stage, the exact nature of any developments cannot be known. For these reasons, and to ensure that future decisions can be made expeditiously, mutual agreement on a clear structure for the government and management of the Project is vital. A two-tier proposal is recommended below.

(6) The government of the Project would be undertaken by a Policy Board consisting of eleven which would include five appointed by the two LEAs (three ILEA, two Newham), five by LDDC and one representative of the residential community to be agreed amongst the three sponsors. Within this framework, the LEAs and the LDDC would be free to appoint representatives they felt to be appropriate. The LDDC would appoint a maximum of two persons from the Corporation itself and would appoint others including employer and employee representatives from within the industrial and commercial community.

The full-time Director of SKILLNET will attend all meetings of the Policy Board as Secretary to the Board.

Non-LEA appointees and co-optees should serve for three years renewable for a second three-year term only. LEA appointees should be appointed for three years and re-appointed to serve the remainder of their terms after municipal elections, for a maximum of six years' service.

The Policy Board would be free to invite other non-voting representatives or specialists to its meetings. The level of seniority should be such as to ensure that the function of determining the policy of the Project, in the light of each sponsor's own policies, can be exercised. The Policy Board could be expected to meet quarterly and undertake the following tasks:

(a) the formal approval of schemes

(b) the formal approval of scheme funding

(c) the formal consideration of evaluation reports

(d) the reconciliation of any differences of opinion between the partners and the Project.

(7) The day-to-day management of the Project would be undertaken by an Executive Group informed by Local Advisory Board.

(8) The Executive Group would be made up of a full-time Director in the Chair, and persons designated by ILEA, LDDC and LBN. It would initially undertake the following tasks:

(a) enabling actual and potential providers and consumers to identify needs

(b) enabling partnerships to be established

(c) submitting detailed schemes for approval by the Policy Board

(d) monitoring and evaluating schemes and reporting to the Policy Board

(e) working in close co-operation with the Docklands Forum, the Open College of the City and East London (SCOPE) and the Open College of South London.

(9) The Local Advisory Board would comprise representatives of the local providing institutions, trade unions, voluntary sector plus representatives of the resident community.

Representatives should serve for three years renewable for a second three-year term only.

It would meet formally each quarter to:

(a) advise on gaps in provision

(b) advise on the value of proposed schemes, and especially their relationship to existing institutional provision

(c) propose ideas for schemes

(d) advise on use of existing networks of communication and, as necessary, the creation of new networks to ensure continuing contact with the resident community, industry and commerce

(e) consider evaluation reports.

(10) The co-operation outlined above is designed to ensure a fast and relevant response from the education and training institutions to meet the needs of local residents, workers and employers, as specified in the aims of the Project. The forms of government and management are designed, therefore, to facilitate the sponsors' co-operative effort.

(D) LEGAL ARRANGEMENTS

*(11) The sponsoring bodies are agreed that Docklands SKILLNET should possess its own separate legal identity which would provide it with a degree of independence and control but which would also define its limitations in respect of its relationship with the providing education and training institutions, i.e. it would not become an alternative or competing **provider** of education and training. Its role would be that of a facilitator. Where provision is not available then alternative methods of provision, including premises, will be sought.*

The sponsors are agreed that urgent discussions are necessary in order to decide as soon as possible on the most appropriate legal mechanism.

(12) Docklands SKILLNET could be established as a Charitable Trust or a Company, an educational charity, limited by guarantee. The factors to be taken into account are:

(a) the objects of the legal body should reflect the aims of the Project and thereby restrict sponsors to specific roles indicated in 4.2 (d) above

(b) facilitating access to a wider range of funds (e.g. European Social Fund)

(c) financial benefits and costs (e.g. VAT) which can vary depending on legal status

(d) public accountability.

(E) THE TITLE OF THE PROJECT

(13) The sponsoring bodies are agreed that the title of the project should be Docklands SKILLNET. The subsidiary explanatory statement on headed notepaper, documentation, etc., would be Docklands Education and Training Network.

(F) RESOURCE BASE AND CENTRE

(14) In July 1985, LDDC supported the idea of a small resource base and centre for the Project to be located ultimately at Stoneyard Lane close to where new ILEA post-16 provision will be built. A base/centre, provided by LDDC, but controlled by the Project partners, would be invaluable as:

(a) a base for SKILLNET staff

(b) an access point to local joint provision of guidance, counselling, open learning materials and the education/training network generally

(c) the centre for any electronic network including the operation of appropriate data bases

(d) a location designated for consultations with employers on training packages.

The partners are also agreed that the provision of a local presence of SKILLNET in other parts of Docklands should be actively pursued thereby reflecting the objectives of meeting Docklands' wide needs and demands.

(G) INTERIM ARRANGEMENTS

(15) The sponsoring bodies agreed that prior to the establishment of permanent legal arrangements a Joint Officers Steering Group should be formed. The following Terms of Reference are now agreed:

(a) to secure the formal approval of the three sponsors to this agreement

(b) to establish a permanent legal body representing Docklands SKILLNET

(c) to establish an appointments board responsible for appointing a full-time Director of Docklands SKILLNET and to undertake the necessary advertising, selection and appointment procedures

(d) to determine the roles of sponsoring bodies and project personnel in the interim period

(e) to establish the resource base and centre for SKILLNET (as in (F) above) and agree funding arrangements

(f) to consider options for promoting a local presence for SKILLNET in Southwark and Newham

(g) to inform providing bodies in the network of the agreement reached and the proposed future steps

(h) to agree the publicity and promotional material for SKILLNET

(i) to agree a timetable for (a) to (h) above

(j) to agree other actions necessary to establish the permanent arrangements for SKILLNET.

This agreement is recommended for approval by the three sponsoring bodies.

Pat White – Principal Careers Officer
INNER LONDON EDUCATION AUTHORITY

Michael Dann – Head of Continuing Education Division
LONDON BOROUGH OF NEWHAM

Phil Smith – Technology Director
LONDON DOCKLANDS DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION

9th December 1987

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OBJECTIVES

The objectives for which **The Further Education Unit (FEU)** is established are to promote, encourage and develop the efficient provision of further education in the United Kingdom and for that purpose.

a) to review and evaluate the range of existing further education curricula and programmes and to identify overlap, duplication, deficiencies and inconsistencies therein;

b) to determine priorities for action to improve the provision of further education and to make recommendations as to how such improvements can be effected;

c) to carry out studies in further education and to support investigations of and experimentation in, and the development of, further education curricula and to contribute to and assist in the evaluation of initiatives in further education;

d) to disseminate and publish, and to assist in the dissemination and publication of, information about recommendations for and experiments and developments in further educations.